

FUTURE FICTION

AUGUST

15¢

THEY NEVER COME BACK

A Complete Novel

By FRITZ
LEIBER, JR

also
ROUSSEAU
BLISH
WINTERBOTHAM
SAARI
and others

JOHN
FORTE



DO THE DEAD RETURN?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," tells of astonishing experiences in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. Here he lived among the lamas, mystic priests of the temple. "In your previous lifetime," a very old lama told him, "you lived here, a lama in this temple. You and I were boys together. I lived on, but you died in youth, and were reborn in England. I have been expecting your return."

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young man himself later became a noted explorer and geographer, a successful publisher of maps and atlases of the Far East, used throughout the world.

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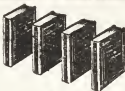
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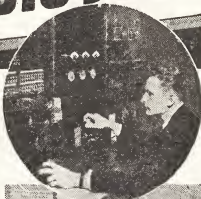
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THEY NEVER COME BACK

by FRITZ LEIBER, JR.

(Author of "Two Sought Adventure," "The Bleak Shore," etc.)

Bart Harlan found himself pitted not only against the sinister skipper and crew of the MOLLY R., but against the deep-grained tradition of space-travel itself when he insisted that the lost ship SPHINX might be found and brought to safety. Yet he had to convince someone his theory was correct, because the person who meant more to him than anybody else in the world, Ann Wilkerson, had been on the lost ship.

A COMPLETE NOVEL





"Slowly the Molly R. became semi-transparent."

"HEY, YOU! What's your business?"

Bart Harlan, standing on the cat-walk that circled the upper rim of the docking-cradle, did not immediately answer the shouted question. He clung to the thin hand rail, bracing himself against the sheets of rain which drove across the almost deserted landing field, and stared wearily down into the shadowy interior of the cradle. It was about the grubbiest looking space-tramp he'd ever seen. Its weblike outer skin of molybdo-barium meteorite cushionings was tarnished black, except

where recent gouges revealed shining metal. One boarding grapple was badly bent; it would not quite fold back into the housing, and stuck out like a broken finger. The iso-quartz space ports showed no lights; they peered like dead eyes from behind the molybdo-barium interweave. A trip to the repair cradles was certainly in order; no space-ship inspector would ever O. K. a tramp like that, unless the bribe was pretty steep.

Suddenly Bart Harlan lifted his head to the driving rain and laughed grimly. To think that it was only twenty-four hours since the *Sphinx*

should have landed in this very docking cradle! *Should* have landed. That terrible radio announcement was burned into his memory: "Friends, it is with deepest grief we announce that the *Space Ship Sphinx*, earthward from Mars, lost contact with its warp about a half an hour ago. The cause is unknown. Aboard were Professor Wilkerson, who captained his own ship, his daughters Ann and Lucy, Navigator Williams, and three crew members. Professor Wilkerson, as you all know, is a distinguished member of the Scientists' Central Committee, and . . ."

Bart shook his head despairingly. Those announcements were always the same. Death knells. Because no space ship ever came back, once it lost contact with the warp along which it had been traveling. This was due to the nature of extraterrestrial navigation, which was entirely different from what a scientist of the early twentieth century would have imagined. Ships did not move freely through space. They clung to space warps—invisible lines along which the gravitational pull between the various planets of the solar system was concentrated. The discovery of the existence of these warps toward the end of the twentieth century—and the possibility of intensifying them by special projectors—had revolutionized the science of physics and made space travel possible. However, once a ship lost its warp, because of an explosion or some other serious accident, it was doomed. It could not navigate. It was too small an object to be seen by telescope. It could not even be reached by radio, since the long radio waves had been found to travel chiefly along warps, except for short distances. Therefore "They never come back" was the grimmest

proverb in the dangerous Extraterrestrial Traffic—four words a spaceman seldom said but was always thinking.

Bart gripped the guard rail until his knuckles showed white. His thoughts had turned, for the thousandth time, to Ann Wilkerson. Laughing, madcap Ann. The girl who, in spite of the trouble between them, meant all the world to him. What was there left for him now? His chief aim in life had been lost when they'd expelled him from I. I. E. N. (International Institute of Extraterrestrial Navigation). His expulsion had begun the trouble between him and Ann; her father had forbidden her to see him.

And now Ann was gone. Why, he asked himself furiously, was he hanging around this docking cradle? It couldn't bring her back. Nothing could bring her back, except possibly his theory . . . and now he would never be given a chance to prove that theory.

A gust of wind buffeted him, and he almost slipped from the cat-walk. "An easy death," he thought, without feeling any especial emotion except a chilling misery. "Why not?"

"HEY, YOU up there! Are you deaf? What's your business?"

Bart stared down incuriously into the cradle. He could just about make out the speaker, and no more. A little man standing outside an open entry port. He seemed to be staring upward and using one hand to shield his face from the rain. There was an urgent ring to his voice. When he saw that Bart was looking at him, he called again, but this time in a more confidential tone.

"Did Vanetti send you?"

Still Bart did not answer. Why

should he bother to? He felt completely out of touch with the concerns of the people around him, now that Ann was gone.

The little man seemed to interpret his silence as a kind of qualified agreement, for he went on, "Well, you're a navigator, aren't you?"

Bart was about to tell him he'd made a mistake, when a daring thought leapt into his mind. After all, why shouldn't he? He had nothing to lose. He was a navigator in everything but name. He'd completed his seven year course at I. I. E. N. before he'd been kicked out and disqualified. He'd seen more than a billion miles of student service. He knew more than most of the men who were graduated with honors. This tramp looked as if it needed a navigator badly enough to take a chance and—most important of all—it *would be traveling along the same warp from which Wilkerson's ship had vanished*; otherwise it wouldn't be in this particular cradle. A growing excitement sent the blood whipping up into his face. Bart had a theory about what might happen to ships that lost contact with their space warp . . . and the captain of a tramp might be just the man to listen to a wild rescue plan. Of course, if he were caught navigating without credentials, it would mean ten years in the Mars Penal Colony. But it was worth it. It was worth it!

"Hey, you looking at the rain! Can't you talk?"

Bart leaned over and waved him a vague salute.

"Be right down."

As he descended the narrow spiral stairs, he let his gaze rove over the landing field. To a man of an earlier age, it would have looked like nothing so much as a collection of silvery gas

tanks, but to a man of the twenty-first century it meant cradles, warp intensifiers—the highway to the Martian and Venusian frontiers. There were few signs of activity. A couple of repairmen clad in synthetic rubber were working on the nearest cradle. A tiny, beetlelike runabout scuttled past and vanished into the curtain of rain which blotted out the further cradles. Somewhere a loud-speaker was monotonously shouting a name. Bart entered the short passageway that led to the interior of the cradle.

At closer view the tramp presented an even more disreputable appearance. There didn't seem to be a single exterior fitting that had been serviced for months. And the general stench was nostril-wrinkling; Mars dirt and Venus dirt, as well as Earth dirt, were in evidence. Yet he liked the lines of the ship; they promised speed. It was a 2067 Willis-Lang Archangel, he decided; not a bad model at all. He noted the name above the entry port. The *Molly R.*

"Well, you took your time, all right. What was the idea of going up on the cat-walk? Giving us the once-over?" said the little man, who turned out to be a thin-faced, beak-nosed Londoner.

Bart nodded noncommittally.

"Well, come on. Captain's going space-crazy waiting for you."

But before the Londoner went through the port of the *Molly R.*, he reached up mechanically and touched the name plate of the ship—a spaceman's typical "good luck" gesture. Spacemen were notoriously superstitious, more so even than the early aviators had been. Bart duplicated the gesture and then followed, feeling his way along the unlit center passage. His mind was an excited confusion of vague hopes and vaguer

plans, yet somehow he felt that he had a *hunch*. He decided against asking why the lights weren't on. The less he said, the better.

HE STUMBLED into the large bunk room and then pulled up short, realizing his guide had stopped and that he was in the presence of half a dozen men. At first he could hardly discern the outlines of their figures. It was damnably dark, with the only light coming from a grimy iso-quartz side port. He heard an intermittent metallic tapping that somehow set his teeth on edge. Then, as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, forms and faces began to appear, as if emerging from a fog.

"Here's your navigator, Captain Driscoll."

It was his guide who spoke. Bart turned to the one who had been addressed. He made out small, watery eyes peering at him from a reddish complexioned face. Captain Driscoll's hunched, wiry body gave the impression of restless energy. He was snuffing nervously and brushing his nose with his thumb.

"So you're a navigator, eh . . . eh?"

"I can navigate," answered Bart. The first flame of his excitement had burned out. He was cautious and alert.

The captain chuckled shortly. "Oh, so that's how it is. You can navigate but you're not a navigator, eh? There's a difference, isn't there, boys?"

A chorus of affirmative grunts answered him. Bart found a certain ironic amusement in the abnormally lax discipline, in the way the captain fraternized with his crew. The text books never mentioned space ships like this one. Most of the men were sprawled in the bunks. There was a tall, leather skinned Mongolian,

whom Bart later discovered was always simply referred to as "Chinaman." Sitting next to the captain, as close as to dwarf him, was a great fat hulk with hands like paws and a face disfigured by space-frostbite; he was addressed as "Morgan." Again Bart heard the measured metallic tapping, but could not locate it.

"Well, at least the guy Vanetti sent us isn't talkative."

The malicious voice came from an upper bunk, from which a youthful, pasty face peered down—a white blur in the semi-darkness.

"Shut up, Kid," said Morgan thickly, without turning his head.

Bart decided it would be wisest to lay his cards on the table.

"Vanetti didn't send me. I just happened along."

Immediately the atmosphere became taut, hostile. Captain Driscoll snuffed twice and then questioned sharply, "But why did you say you could navigate?"

"Because I can."

"What's your name?"

"Bart Harlan."

Silence. Then a husky, commanding voice from the darkest corner of the bunkroom.

"Wait a minute, Driscoll. I think I've heard of this guy."

Bart made out a pair of legs dangling from an upper bunk.

"Who is he, Leshner?" questioned Driscoll.

The legs slipped down and Leshner advanced, limping slightly. He was a stocky, stoop shouldered man, whose face was covered with a network of premature wrinkles and whose black eyes had the cold, hawk-like stare of the veteran spaceman. Locks of greasy black hair straggled down his forehead from under his pilot's cap, which was pushed back on his head. His right hand was

missing. In its place was a steel claw with three prongs which could open and shut. He was rapping it thoughtfully against a tobacco tin. This was the sound Bart had been unable to place.

"Yeah, I know him all right. Saw his picture in the *Spaceman's Gazette* three months back. Same guy. Got kicked out of I. I. E. N. for getting smart with your professors, didn't you?"

Bart nodded.

There was a perceptible lessening of the hostile tension. The men looked at Bart with a new interest. Just then his guide, who had left the bunkroom, returned.

"Vanetti phoned."

"What did he say, Wilson?" questioned Driscoll.

"Can't get a navigator for us—at least today. Says they all tell him that the job is . . ."

BART didn't quite catch the last word. It was cut short by a villainous glare from Leshner. But he thought it was "risky." His suspicions of the unkempt crew of the *Molly R* were increased. But he felt no desire to back out. The thought of Ann Wilkerson held him like a magnet, even though he realized his theory of what might have happened to the *Sphinx* was wild and improbable. And, after all, no legitimate space ship would think of taking an uncertified navigator. Just what was Driscoll planning, Bart wondered? Navigators were not easy to obtain in any case. They were the aristocrats of the Extraterrestrial Traffic. It took a highly intelligent man with a peculiarly intuitive mathematical ability to get through the seven year course at I. I. E. N., to master the lore of the space warps, the theory of fourth-dimensional torques, the

calculus of hyper-space. In an emergency only the highly specialized knowledge of a navigator could suggest the right maneuver to save a ship.

An unspoken conference seemed to be going on inside the darkened bunkroom of the *Molly R*. Captain Driscoll turned to each of his crew in turn, and received a nod or a noncommittal shrug of the shoulders. Bart knew they were "passing" on him.

"Well, Harlan," said Driscoll finally, "I can offer you the pay of a certified navigator. Our destination is . . . well, Mars. What do you say, eh?"

"I'll take it."

"Very good. We slide into the warp at 7.15 tonight."

"That'll hardly give me time to get my tables and calculators, or my clothes."

"You won't need 'em. Will he, boys, eh?" Driscoll replied. "Last navigator we had ran out on us and left all his things behind. He was certified, eh, boys?"

Bart felt the hair on the back of his neck bristling in a reaction of mingled excitement and apprehension.

"Well, Harlan, this is our complete crew. Leshner's our senior pilot. Morgan's our engineer."

Bart acknowledged the informal introductions with a nod. Perhaps it was the name Morgan that made him think of an ancient-day pirate crew. The leather-skinned Chinaman; the beak-nosed Wilson; the pasty-faced Kid; the hulking engineer with his disfiguring space-burns (in another age they would have been cutlass-slashes); the illu-sively pale-eyed Captain Driscoll; and especially the brooding Leshner with a three pronged hook instead of a hand—all made an unpleasant and

sinister picture in the eerie half-light.

The picture stuck in his mind long after Wilson had taken him to the navigator's tiny private cabin, with an injunction to "lie low until the inspector's come and gone." Just what sort of a mess had he gotten himself into? Thoughts of Ann came between him and this speculation. Yet he felt his earlier mood of enthusiasm evaporating and despair beginning to return. How could he ever interest Driscoll in his rescue plans? He realized that his wild hope was built on a very flimsy foundation. Just his unverified theory that space ships which lost contact with their warp sometimes spiralled around that warp until repeated meteor impacts broke up the circular movement and they contacted a "sun warp" and started on the slowly accelerating plunge towards the sun.

If true, the theory meant that "they sometimes *came back*"—that there was a faint chance of rescue, if one was on the lookout. But it was only a wild speculation, Bart told himself bitterly. He began to think he was a fool, and acting like a fool. Getting mixed up with Heaven knew what devilry, just because of a wild inspiration born of despair. He found his lips forming the words "They never come back" and, mainly to find mental escape, he began to check over the charts and calculating machines of his predecessor—the navigator who had run out and left his things behind him. Bart found them complete and in good order, and the longer he contemplated them the more he found himself wondering just why they had been left behind. A case of desertion? He studied the signature his predecessor had inscribed on the fly leaves of his books.

A firm, neat "John Richards, Navigator."

There was a metallic tapping at the door. Leshar entered, touching his steel claws to his lips to enjoin silence. Bart noticed that the passage lights had been turned on. Before the door closed he heard the captain saying in a hearty voice, "Well, inspector, I guess you've seen about all there is aboard, eh . . .?"

And the oily reply, "Yes, it's O. K., Driscoll. I won't need to bother to interview your navigator, since you say his papers are all in order."

The words could mean only one thing. Bribery.

"Mister Harlan," said Leshar, leaning against the bunk and running his hand through his straggling hair, "I got a little question that's bothering me. Do you know enough about space-torques to be able to slip a ship from one warp to another, when the warps happen to intersect?"

"Certainly, though it's a ticklish job. Requires considerable calculation. Only to be adopted as an emergency measure. Why's it bothering you, Leshar?"

"Just a theoretical interest, Mister Harlan. Just theoretical. Well, you better get up to the control room soon. About an hour and we'll be sliding into the warp."

And he slouched off.

A QUEER question, thought Bart. Warp slipping was a maneuver that was almost never used. Since the gravitational warps changed their positions with the movements of the planets, they occasionally passed through each other and momentarily intersected. But why should Leshar be interested in such a matter? Hadn't Captain Driscoll said their destination was Mars? Bart decided Leshar must have been

trying to test his knowledge. He shook his head dubiously and prepared to go up to the control room.

As he was gathering up the books of tables a thin ledger fell out of one. He hastily inspected it and found it to be Richards' diary. He wondered why a deserter would happen to leave such a thing behind. Moved by curiosity, he rapidly scanned the last pages. They proved to be a record of the *Molly R's* trip in from Mars. The final entry sent a spasm of emotion through him. It read, "The Chinaman's just talked with the ship ahead of us on the warp. It's the *Sphinx*, owned by Professor Wilkerson of the Scientists' Central Committee. I told Leshner he was running too close behind it for safety, but he won't pay any attention to me. I was a fool ever to have signed up on this damned ship. Never again. Of course, I made a complaint to Driscoll. As usual he told me he'd talk to Leshner about it. But he never will, the shifty-eyed little incompetent. I'll make it hot for him when I talk to the Navigators' Bureau. And I'll do that as soon as we reach Earth. But what can I do now? Nothing, except take some caffeine tablets and wait up in the control room so as to be ready for emergencies. Of course, Leshner won't like it. Damn him. The man gives me the creeps, always fiddling around with that steel claw."

There the entry ended. Bart's first thought was that this explained why Richards had left the ship so suddenly. He had gone to register a complaint; and, of course, Driscoll was probably anxious to get away from Earth before an injunction could be brought against the *Molly R*.

Bart's second reaction was a reawakening of his earlier excitement. So the *Molly R* had talked to the

Sphinx! That might give him additional information as to the exact point of disappearance.

There came another knock at the door. He hastily pocketed the diary.

"Leshner wants you up in the control room pretty quick."

It was the scar-faced engineer who spoke.

"Say," blurted out Bart, "How long were you talking to the *Sphinx* before it was lost?"

Morgan stared at him dumbly. His face seemed to turn a trifle pale. Bart realized he had touched a tender point in spaceman's superstition—the fear of mentioning lost ships by name.

"What, *that* ship? Yeah, we maybe talked to her. Can't say when. You better get up forward."

The next hour Bart spent mostly with Leshner, making routine calculations and check-ups. Meanwhile the crew stowed the scanty cargo. Wilson came up and made a cursory inspection of the control room fittings and of the forward valve chamber, through which a man in a space suit could reach the outer hull if vital repairs were needed in transit. Bart noticed that the crew were able workers, but weak on cooperation. There were several exchanges of hot language. Once Morgan and the Kid almost came to blows trying to decide whose job it was to service the starboard propulsor. With every delay the nervousness of the men seemed to increase.

FINALLY the check-up was completed and the fuel tanks filled with hydrocarbon-synthetic. Warning signals were exchanged with the engineers in charge of the space-warp intensifiers under the cradle. Leshner slid into the pilot's seat and switched on the electro-magnetic

artificial gravity. A double force bound each member of the crew to the metal floor of the ship; for the first moment it felt like walking on fly-paper. In two minutes the *Molly R* would hit the warp.

"Hope you won't mind my asking," said Bart to Leshar, "but I heard you talked to the *Sphinx* on your last trip. I happen to be interested in her."

He felt he *must* convince someone of the feasibility of his rescue plans. Otherwise the risk he was running as an uncertified navigator would be in vain.

The black-eyed pilot did not take his hand or claw off the controls, but his head swung around quickly.

"Why do you ask that?"

"Because I happened to know some of the people aboard and . . ."

The warning light gleamed yellow. Leshar picked up the mike of the ship's individual sound system and barked a warning.

"We're elevating!"

Then he threw in a switch and slowly drew back a lever. The nose of the *Molly R* began to rise. Now the two gravity systems, the artificial and the natural, began to oppose one another, until it was hard to keep footing. Bart settled back into his all-rubber seat behind the navigator's keyboard. Grey, rain-swept sky became visible through the observation port. When the hull was verticle to the Earth, the movement ceased.

"Why the devil," said Leshar in a curiously low voice, "do you have to talk about the *Sphinx*? Listen to me, Harlan; forget that ship. Are you trying to jinx our start?"

Bart was taken aback by this display of superstition from a competent man, even though he knew he should have expected it.

"But, you see, I've a special interest in the *Sphinx*," he ventured.

Now Leshar's eyes were fixed on the chronometer, watching the fractional seconds. Bart pressed three buttons on the navigator's keyboard. The yellow light began to blink rapidly.

"Harlan, why are you on board?" Leshar's question was abrupt and knifelike.

"You know at least one good reason. I need the money," Bart temporized, realizing it was not a good time to press his point.

The light gleamed green. Leshar began to draw back the propulser and centralizer levers, notch after notch. A purring sound became audible, rising to a vibrant hum. The *Molly R* quivered as if it were a live thing feeling for the lines of force of the warp. Finally it seemed to settle itself, like a cat about to spring. Bart braced himself, his eyes concentrating on the keyboard.

"O. K., Harlan. I'll just tell you one thing more. Merely good advice. Don't ever try to back down on us."

The vibrant hum rose to a crescendo. The *Molly R* whipped up into space.

CHAPTER II

CASTAWAYS

COLD, implacably chilling. The silence of interplanetary space. The unpleasant feeling of giddiness that comes with the absence of gravitation or its equivalent. The trembling nervousness that is supposed to be partly due to the unimpeded action of cosmic and sub-cosmic rays. Above all, the terrible loneliness of a lost and battered ship, a ship that could never come back.

Ann Wilkerson put down the can of tungsten-plastic. That is, she placed it in the air about a foot from one of the side walls, and it wavered and hung. Then she blew on her knuckles and drew on her fur-lined mittens. How long, she thought, would her horrible, futile vigil last? It was thirty-one hours since the catastrophe, and still the mangled hulk of the *Sphinx* was not perceptibly nearer the sun. Just how far it had moved from the warp she could not tell, for the control room was destroyed. Indeed, the whole ship was destroyed, torn open, air sucked out, save for the aft cabin in which she and Lucy had been locked by her father when he realized that the boarders were pirates. Her father . . . Ann tried not to think of him, and of Navigator Williams and the rest of the crew. All, all dead. Smashed by explosive bullets. Blown to pieces in the final explosion.

"Ann," called a faint voice, "Ann, come close to me. Don't stay away."

Lucy was huddled against the ceiling, which was a little warmer than the rest of the cabin, since the sunlight was now striking on that side. Her face was drawn, eyes pale, lips trembling. When Ann put her arms around her, she buried her face in her sister's thick fur collar and began to sob.

"Ann," she said, "I know we've got to die. I can face that. It's being so far away from earth, and all alone. And waiting, waiting, waiting! I'm afraid of the emptiness outside. Stay close to me, Ann."

For a few minutes the girls clung silently to one another. The cabin was illuminated by a beam of sunlight which came through the tiny ceiling port. Not the warm, diffracted sunlight of Earth, but the strange, harsh sunlight of inter-

planetary space. The front cabin wall had been buckled inward by the final explosion, and was here and there daubed with tungsten-plastic, the universal quick repair agent. It was still air tight. In one corner was the small radio sending set which Ann had almost succeeded in repairing and hooking up to the auxiliary generator, miraculously intact; the spare parts and tools hung about it as if by magic in the gravitationless space. Tied to a wall were two space suits, semi-rigid affairs resembling those of a diver.

It was all so hopeless, thought Ann, with a shudder. But she must go on trying. She must! Otherwise she wouldn't have the power to comfort Lucy, to give Lucy something to cling to. No, she had to keep working; trying to fix up a radio transmitter, although she knew radio was almost useless except when sending along a warp. She had to keep daubing suspicious looking cracks with tungsten-plastic, listening for meteorite impacts. She had to keep working for fourteen hours more. By that time the aft oxygen tank and the oxygen canisters of the space suits would be empty.

But, as she held her frightened younger sister, one finger hooked around a ceiling fixture so they wouldn't drift away, she couldn't keep her thoughts from circling back to the catastrophe. It had all come so unexpectedly. Of course, she had known of the priceless supply of isotrium-concentrate her father was bringing back to the vaults of the S. C. C. (the Scientists' Central Committee). Discovered on Mars and only recently isolated in workable quantities, isotrium was yet unplaced in the table of elements—indeed, it bid fair to upset the whole theory of subatomic physics. Sensational stories

about the "Martian metal" or "Super-radium" had already appeared in the popular press—stories which detailed its destructive action on human flesh, its inertness toward carbon, and its weird cold glow. But the S. C. C. had not yet revealed that isotrium-concentrate acted as a catalyst to release atomic energy without generating heat, to *dissipate* all elements with the exception of carbon. The S. C. C. had a monopoly of the dangerous stuff, which was priceless if for no other reason than that it was never offered for sale. But who ever have dreamed of piracy on the space warps? Ann had always thought that nothing could happen to her father; he was too high in the councils of the S. C. C., which wielded as much influence as the government itself. Nevertheless, disaster had struck him down.

IT HAD BEGUN when the tramp traveling the warp behind them had called for help. The *Molly R.* Only Williams had been at all suspicious, and her father brusquely overrode his objections. "They tell us their fuel tanks are burning, Williams," he had said, "and we can't leave them to roast like mice in an oven." Ann remembered his stern expression, his dignified air of command. The two ships were quickly slowed down and brought together, side by side. "Tandem warping" the maneuver was called. Then the boarding grapples were interlocked, the telescopic boarding port pushed out and fitted into the entry port of the *Molly R.* Ann recalled Williams standing at the end of the boarding port and saying, "I can't smell the fire, Professor Wilkerson." Those were his last words. There was the characteristic whine of an explosive bullet, and his suit mushroomed out

and splattered. After that . . . nightmare. Her father hurrying Lucy and herself into the aft cabin, locking the door against her bewildered, terrified objections; then striding back, gun in hand—she watched him through the inter-cabin port. Then further explosions, shoutings, screamings of men in deathly pain. Her father rushing back again toward the locked door, his shirt all blood, and collapsing just outside. And she unable even to get to him! Then those men—the great fat one and the one who had a hook instead of a hand. One of them was carrying the small chest of solid carbon which contained the isotrium. Ann had fainted. The final blast had awakened her. It rocked the whole ship. It destroyed the artificial gravity system, for Ann found herself floating in the air. When she managed to get to the inter-cabin port, she saw what had happened. The forward part of the ship was a twisted ruin. Had she not been quick with the tungsten-plastic, the aft cabin would have lost its air too. The space pirates had evidently left a charge behind them to complete their work of destruction and blow the *Sphinx* off the warp. She and Lucy had survived—but they were doomed.

Lucy's sobbings ceased. When she lifted her head there was a strange little smile on her face.

"Ann, I want to go and look at the earth again."

Ann released her, and she pushed off diagonally across the cabin to a dark space port and hung there, hungrily staring. Ann went back to finish up her work on the radio transmitter. She became so absorbed in it that part of the weight of her misery lifted. Mechanical work became peculiarly simplified in a gravitationless system; you could leave a

couple of parts hanging poised in the air while you hunted for the right tool; you never had to waste time grubbing around on the floor after fallen screws and bolts.

There was a dull crack and the cabin shook slightly. A meteorite. Immediately Ann pushed off in the direction of the can of tungsten-plastic. Then she waited until she located a faint hiss of escaping air. It was in the extreme stern. She pushed off again, found the danger spot—a bolt which had been previously loosened—and squeezed out a blob of plastic. Air pushed the viscous metalloid partly into the crevice before it hardened into a neat patch. The hissing stopped. Ann went back to her work.

Lucy clung to the dark space port, as if she would never tire of gazing at the earth.

"It's so beautiful, Ann," she said in a wistful voice. "It's not nearly so big as the Moon is when you see it from Earth, a hazy green crescent, dappled with white. Those are the clouds. The rest of it's black, outlined against the stars. Just think, it's sunrise there along that line between the dark part and the hazy green. And off to one side is the crescent Moon. The moon looks ever so small, Ann."

"**Y**OU'D better come away now, Lucy," said Ann, dreading another outburst. "It's cold there, and you must be freezing. Besides, I think I've got the radio in shape, and I'm going to try to send off a message."

Lucy turned her head. "Why do you go on bothering about that radio. It just makes it so much worse. You know no one can hear us. You know there's no chance."

"But there may be. We don't seem

to have drifted far from the warp. We may still be within radio range."

"What difference can that make? We can't be saved. You know what they say . . ." her lips faltered on the words, "They never come . . . back. Now that means us, Ann."

Ann fought against her own rising sense of doom.

"We've got to keep trying," she managed to say.

But Lucy's words kept sounding in her ears. "They never come back . . . never come back . . . never." Suddenly she found herself thinking of Bart Harlan. He was the one person she ever remembered finding fault with that grim proverb. "Loony Bart" the other fellows at I. I. E. N. used to call him. His square-jawed face and smiling eyes swam up into her memory. She wondered if she still loved him. Dear, crazy Bart. It was almost a year since he'd been expelled in disgrace because of his wild pranks and disregard of authority; almost a year since her father had forbidden her to speak to him. She had obeyed, because her father's word was law. She had even thought she was beginning to forget him. And now his face seemed to smile at her, and to hold out hope. Desperately she sought to remember his theory about lost ships. What was it? Something about the possibility of them circling the warp they had lost, caught in the space field that surrounded each warp . . . and even getting back near their warp for a time, if the conditions were right . . .

"Ann, dear," called Lucy in a voice that was dangerously near to breaking, "the Earth looks so tiny and far away. It makes me frightened."

Ann's momentary mood of hopefulness vanished at the words, and she found herself plunged into a reaction of black despair. After all,

she thought, Bart was only a student with wild ideas. How could there be anything to his theory? Her father had told him it was nonsense. And he'd been expelled from I. I. E. N. That proved he was a person you couldn't take seriously, didn't it?

So it was with a feeling of futility that Ann pushed the levers and buttons that controlled the auxiliary generator. A faint humming filled the cabin. With listless fingers she adjusted the transmitter, picked up the microphone, and began.

"*Space Ship Sphinx* sending. *Space Ship Sphinx* sending. Can you aid us? We are completely disabled. We lost contact with Mars-Earth warp 17 at about 4:15 Tuesday, Universal Time. We were about 3,400,000 miles from Earth when we lost contact. This is Ann Wilkerson sending. We do not seem to have drifted very far. You may be able to sight us. Can you aid us? *Space Ship Sphinx* calling . . ."

She repeated the message three times, her voice becoming more and more mechanical with each utterance. Then, thinking of the missing isotrium, she added an explanation.

"We were boarded by pirates from the freighter *Molly R.* They murdered all the crew, including Professor Wilkerson. They wrecked the *Sphinx*. They have in their possession the box of isotrium-concentrate which Professor Wilkerson was bringing from Mars. It is of the utmost importance that the isotrium be returned to the Scientists' Central Committee. The safety of mankind may depend upon it. One of the pirates had lost his hand and wore a steel hook in its place. *Space Ship Sphinx* calling . . ."

She felt Lucy tugging at her wrist. "Your voice sounds like a ghost's.

There's no hope for us, is there? Let me stay close to you, Ann. We'll die soon, won't we?"

Again Ann took Lucy into her arms and comforted her. She was not angry. Stronger nerves than Lucy's had been broken by the overpowering loneliness of interplanetary space, even in ships that were not doomed. Isolation from the environment of Earth was a thing to which the nervous system of mankind was not yet adjusted. Hospitals were full of cases of "space neurosis" and "cosmic shock." Victims of "space phobia," "gravitational dementia," and similar mental disorders crowded the insane asylums. How could she blame Lucy for giving way to despair? Thinking these thoughts, Ann became aware of her own tiredness and misery. Her imagination set diabolically to work, picturing the vast, airless abyss around her—in every direction millions of miles of frigid emptiness. The absence of gravitational pull made everything seem like an evil nightmare; an irrational fear of falling took possession of her. She wanted to scream, to beat against the metal walls, to hide her eyes, to huddle into one of the lockers and pull the door tight behind her. It was only by the greatest effort that she prevented herself from crying out.

"If Lucy sees my face now," she thought, "we'll both go mad."

THERE was a deafening impact. The wall of the cabin against which they had been poised, rushed away from them, leaving them momentarily isolated in the air. The opposite wall struck them and sent them grotesquely sprawling. Lucy shrieked. Ann clutched at a wall fixture, missed it, managed to catch hold of the leg of an anchored table.

Various loose objects were bounding and sailing about erratically, as if in a gigantic dice-box. She dodged a flying screwdriver. Dazed, she could only think, "a hundred pound meteorite, or heavier." Then on her horrified ears there burst the loud hiss of escaping air. She made out three separate hissings, which meant at least three leaks.

The sound banished her fear. She did not search for the tungsten-plastic; she knew the metalloid would be useless in this emergency; the leaks sounded too big—they would take too long to patch. A glance at the falling gage of the oxygen tank showed that it too had been cracked open. Before she realized it, she had hold of Lucy and was propelling her toward the wall where the space suits were tied. Speed was everything now. Working with all the energy and efficiency she could command, she forced Lucy's legs into the heavy, semi-rigid fabric of one suit.

"My wrist, Ann," said Lucy. "My wrist hurts."

Already her voice sounded unnaturally faint and muffled. That meant the air pressure was falling rapidly.

"Put your arms in here," Ann commanded, as if her sister were a child. "You've just got to."

Her words, or the tone of them, had their effect. Lucy compliantly wriggled into the suit, helped to fasten the hermetic seams, and to adjust the cold resistant helmet of glass-synthetic. Ann manipulated the valve that controlled the oxygen canister, then reached for the second suit. She experienced a sudden attack of faintness. She could nearly hear the hissing of the escaping air. If she wasn't quick now, she'd get the "space bends" from the rapidly diminishing pressure, she realized; bubbles of nitrogen would form in

her blood system, agonizing, paralyzing. It seemed to take ages to slide her legs into the clumsy trousers. The cabin swam around her. There was a ringing in her ears, to which she knew no real sound corresponded. Fighting dizziness, she pulled on the arms of the suit. As she reached for the helmet she realized that her consciousness was going fast. Her fingers felt thick and numb; she couldn't seem to move them. The ringing in her ears was deafening. Everything was spinning and turning red . . .

Lucy made the convulsive movement of a person just recovering from a shock. Her bewildered eyes encountered her sister. She saw Ann's nerveless hands, swathed in the heavy gloves of the space suit, fumbling futilely with the hermetic seams. If Lucy had been fully conscious of what was happening, she might have acted differently and given way to terror. As it was, she responded with a kind of dreamlike decisiveness to her sister's plight. Her hands automatically sought out and fastened the hermetic seams, tightened the helmet, flooded the suit with life-giving oxygen.

"How long have we left?" questioned Lucy.

"About two hours of oxygen in each canister. How long was I unconscious?"

"It seemed forever. I thought you were dead. Maybe half an hour. I don't know."

For a while they clung together in their clumsy suits, trying to shut out the thought of the terrible emptiness that had invaded the very cabin. It occurred to Ann that she might as well open the emergency entry port—it made no difference now. What did anything matter now?

Slowly the spasm of terror passed.

The feeling that she must do something, no matter how hopeless it was, came back to her. She disengaged herself from Lucy's embrace and made her way to the radio. She could not tell if it was still all in order. No matter. She adjusted the controls as best she could in the darkness. She worked the microphone into her suit through the special pocket that had hermetic slits both inside and out.

"Space Ship *Sphinx* calling . . .
Space Ship *Sphinx* calling . . ."

CHAPTER III

UNMASKED

THE *Molly R*, a million miles out, drove swiftly along warp 17. The metal hull was filled with the faint, deep hum of the great centralizing rotor, which held the ship in warp, and the more strident humming of the two propulsers. Leshar still sat at the controls. Bart Harlan, pacing nervously back and forth, marveled at the facility with which the senior pilot manipulated his metal claw. He seemed to prefer it to his good hand.

An automatic bell began to jangle, indicating that a large meteorite had entered the electric field around the ship. Leshar consulted the indicators.

"We'll have to bend warp around her, Harlan," he said, and then barked a warning into the mike.

The jangling increased in volume. The ship gave a sudden, sickening lurch, then straightened out. The jangling died away. Bart released his grip and stared out of the wide observation port into the harsh darkness, which glittered with incredibly brilliant stars. The sun lay astern, but its light was invisible except

when momentarily reflected by a stray fragment of meteoric material. Bart was on edge. Getting away from Earth had been a trying business—his first solo navigation job, and an illegal one at that. But he was oblivious of nervous fatigue. Now that he was actually out in space, thoughts of Ann Wilkerson and the vanished *Sphinx* dominated his mind. Hopes and fears, wild plans for rescue—all worked together to produce a condition of almost painful mental excitement. Although he knew the *Sphinx* had been at least three million miles out when it lost contact with its warp, he found his eyes peering anxiously forward, searching. Smiling grimly, he remembered what the psychologists had to say about the ease with which fixed ideas and monomanias are generated in interplanetary space.

What, he asked himself, would be his best course? Leshar had refused even to talk about the *Sphinx*, on the grounds that it would bring bad luck. Should he try Captain Driscoll? That seemed the only way. Broach the subject cautiously; point out how profitable would be the rescue of such a distinguished world-figure as Professor Wilkerson; the money side ought to appeal strongly to Driscoll.

Leshar interrupted these cogitations.

"What's eating you, Harlan? Looking for a new asteroid? Watch out for your nerves; you don't know this game like I do. Better go and have some grub. Chinaman'll be coming up to relieve me soon. Get a rest. I'll be needing you later."

The veteran pilot's hawk-like face seemed to Bart to be the very incarnation of the spirit of the old-fashioned, superstitious spaceman. There was something inhuman about it, something that partook of the

cold, untempered emptiness of space itself.

Bart walked back and pushed open the door leading aft. It was a heavy, all-metal affair which, when closed and bolted, sealed off the control room hermetically from the rest of the ship—a precaution in case of serious accident to the after part of the hull. On his way to the bunkroom he passed the leather-faced Chinaman, who recognized his presence with an expressionless nod. But Bart hardly noticed him. His thoughts were occupied with plans as to how the search was to be conducted once he had persuaded Captain Driscoll to attempt the rescue of the *Sphinx*. He pictured the *Molly R* cruising along at a relatively slow rate, one man stationed at the meteorite finder (for it ought to register a derelict ship as well as a meteorite), another at the all-way peritelescope, another at the radio . . . himself busy with calculations according to his theory. He tried not to think that Driscoll might refuse. He tried to forget the fixedness with which most spacemen held to the proverb "They never come back."

BACK in the bunkroom the Kid was opening a tin of beefsteak. The tin had a double cover; the opening of the outside one started a chemical process which heated the contents. He greeted Bart.

"Well, if it isn't our Uncertified Navigator. Morgan tells me you're no fake. Says you really can navigate. I admit I had my doubts."

Bart only half heard him. He was absorbed in mentally reviewing a theorem in dimensional torques. The Kid opened the second cover of the tin, swearing because he burned his hand in the process, and attacked his beefsteak. Then, talking with his

mouth full and waving a fork, he proceeded to try to impress Bart with the fact that he was generally a tough guy. He related several wild and semi-criminal escapades in which he figured as the main character. Vanity seemed to be the Kid's most distinguishing feature. Bart, still pondering the knotty theorem, only made a pretense of listening and gave non-committal answers to the frequent demands for praise. Gradually the Kid's tone became more confidential. He liked hearing himself talk uninterrupted.

"Say, Harlan, I don't envy you your job. Leshner told you what happened to Richards, that guy we had before you, didn't he?"

Bart nodded. He hadn't heard the beginning of the question.

"Still, Harlan, you're lucky to get in with a bunch of boys like us. How much extra cash is the skipper giving you? Hasn't told you yet, eh? Take my advice, Harlan old man, don't let him gyp you. Of course, the rest of us deserve the most, because we did the job. Still, you ought to get a fair share. Boy, we sure needed you. It was a ticklish business, waiting there in the docking cradle while Vanetti was trying to get us a navigator. We didn't dare stay long on Earth. We were expecting an official visit any minute, not from the regular inspectors, but from the S. C. C. men—and *they* can't be bribed. I was sure nervous."

Bart had finally begun to listen to him.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he asked.

The Kid stared at him, then burst into a high, giggly laugh.

"Do you mean to tell me Driscoll hasn't given you the dope yet? Or Leshner?"

Bart shook his head impatiently.

"Well, stew me, if that ain't funny! Why, I don't see why I shouldn't tell . . ."

The Kid checked himself suddenly. His mouth hung open. He was staring over Bart's shoulder.

"Talking again, are you?" Lesh's voice carried an overtone of menace.

The pilot limped forward to the table.

"This youngster just loves to hear himself spiel, Mister Harlan." He tapped the Kid on the chest with his claw hand, and the Kid shrank back from the contact. Lesh's voice took on an ingratiating quality. "Don't pay any attention to what he says, Mister Harlan. He's just a young punk trying to make out he's tough. *Aren't you?*"

The Kid's answer was an unintelligible mumble. His eyes were fixed fascinatedly on the claw.

Bart rose to his feet.

"I'd go and get myself a good rest now, Mister Harlan, if I was you." Lesh used his claw to puncture a fresh can. "Hold on, though, that ain't the right way to your cabin."

"I know it isn't," said Bart. "I want to see the captain first."

CAPTAIN DRISCOLL seemed to be startled at Bart's entrance. At least he fumbled nervously with a black box of peculiar appearance which lay on his desk. But Bart took no notice of these actions.

"Sir," he said, "I have a proposition to lay before you. If successful, it would result in a large profit for you."

A look of complete bewilderment came into Driscoll's watery eyes, as if Bart's statement was the last thing in the world he'd expected to hear. He snuffed twice and brushed his nose with his thumb.

"Go ahead," he said.

Bart was in his element. Now that he could talk of his real reason for signing on the *Molly R*, his voice became confident and compelling. He spoke briefly and to the point. He began by showing the large reward that would fall to the man who rescued the *Sphinx*. He outlined his theory about ships which lost contact with their warps. He minimized the old superstitions. He pointed out that the rescue attempt would involve no danger whatsoever, only a temporary reduction in speed. He explained how a slight readjustment of the meteor finding apparatus would greatly increase its range.

But he was so absorbed in his own argument that he did not notice how Driscoll's eyes went wide at the first mention of the *Sphinx*, how Driscoll stopped his nervous fidgeting at the talk of rescue plans, and went rigid. Finally, he did not notice the small shuffling noises behind him.

"With a corresponding stepping up of the frequency of the finder," he was saying, "the range might even be increased to twenty or thirty thousand miles, and that should enable us to . . ."

He was jerked backward, off his feet. He felt a cruel choking pain in his neck. Taken by surprise, he struggled wildly, futilely.

"And now," he heard Lesh's harsh voice, "it's about time we put our proposition to Mister Harlan."

And Morgan's nervous squeak, "Throw him out, I say. Throw him out like Richards, to freeze in space."

Bart began to take in the situation. He realized that Lesh had slipped the claw into the neckband of his shirt and was twisting it tight. Seeing that resistance was futile, one man against three, he lay still. Lesh released the pressure slightly. The feeling of dreamlike abstraction that

had haunted Bart since he boarded the *Molly R* dropped away from him. He began dimly to sense the astounding truth about the *Molly R* and its crew. Chance words and expressions, the Kid's boasting, Driscoll's nervousness—things he had not consciously noted at the time—began to hook up rapidly in his mind. Then his eyes chanced to light on the black box on Driscoll's desk. He noted the initials on it—A. A. W., S. C. C. That could only mean "Andrew A. Wilkerson, Scientists' Central Committee." The truth burst on him like a thunderclap. And with the truth came the realization that, if he made a false move, it might mean death by cold and suffocation in outer space.

"Throw him out," Morgan was repeating. "He'll try to wreck our plans, like Richards did. These navigators are all alike. Let's throw him out and take our chances when we get to Mars."

"And try to sell that stuff on Mars?" asked Leshner contemptuously, pointing with his free hand to the black box. "Oh, no, Morgan, we wouldn't have a chance. We left Earth for the same reason, didn't we? Our fortune's in that box, a fortune for each man jack of us. And the only place we can sell it is on asteroid 87, where there's a rich maniac who doesn't ask questions. He's the man who's hiring us to do this job, isn't he? And the only way we can get to asteroid 87 is to slip from this warp into the Venus-87 warp. They're due to intersect. But I can't turn the trick. It takes a navigator, so help me. We could have done it easily last trip if Richards hadn't balked. Do you get me?"

It was obvious to Bart that, out here in space, Leshner was the real boss of the *Molly R*.

"I don't care," said Morgan. "He'll try to wreck us. He's crazy. Talking about rescuing ships! Only a crazy man talks that way. Throw him out to freeze. I tell you, he's a jinx."

LESHER snarled an imprecation. "You fool, can't you understand anything but motors? If it hadn't been for your hurrying, we might have persuaded Richards to help us. And if you want to talk about jinxes, I'll tell *you* something. There's only one jinx on this ship, and I won't breathe easy until we get rid of it. It's *that*!"

And he pointed again at the square black box.

Morgan, taken aback, squinted his eyes in puzzlement.

"I don't get you," he said slowly. "It's our fortune in that box, just like you said before. And I still don't see why we can't open it up a mite and have a look at it. We can't even be sure the right stuff's there. One look couldn't hurt."

A spasm of mingled exasperation and anger twisted Leshner's face, and Bart winced as the pressure on his neck was momentarily increased.

"Listen, Morgan," continued Leshner, and his words were drops of corrosive, "if you so much as touch that box, so help me, I'll claw you to strips. You fat pig, that isotrium is powerful enough to burn you to death before you could get the box shut."

Morgan's face set in resentful, angry lines; but Captain Driscoll, who had thus far taken no part in the swift exchange of words, began to rap nervously on the desk.

"Quit it, boys," he interjected. "Leshner's right—both about Harlan and this box."

Then he opened a drawer in his

desk and brought out an ugly snub-nosed explosive-bullet revolver. He set it to explode on contact, rather than at a specified range, and laid it down near his hand.

"Let him go, Leshner," he said, "and you put our proposition to him."

Bart found himself jerked to his feet and deposited in a chair. The pressure on his collar relaxed completely, but his throat still pained him severely. He rubbed it and coughed to get his speech back.

"It's this way, Misher Harlan," began Leshner, taking the center of the stage and using a mockingly ingratiating tone of voice. "It's this way. We need your help, Mister Harlan; but, if I may say so, you need ours too, as you can well understand if you've been listening closely to Mister Morgan's recent remarks. He's full of cute ideas, our Mister Morgan is, and he sometimes persuades me to put them into practice. I guess you understand that part of it, all right. Is your neck still bothering you? Too bad. Well, here's the proposition. We've got a commodity for which we can only find a buyer on asteroid 87. And, being in a hurry, we want to get there as fast as we can. With your technical knowledge, Mister Harlan, you can do the warp-shifting trick for us. If you pull it off—and you ought to—everything will be fine and dandy, and Captain Driscoll will be pleased to give you a five thousand dollar bonus. If you make a slip—well, Mister Harlan, you've heard about what happened to poor Mister Richards. I don't like to talk about such things. Still, I must say I can think up cuter ideas than Morgan here when I get going. When you come to think about it, getting shoved out into space is a mighty quick and painless death. Morgan—I hope he won't mind my saying it—

sort of lacks imagination. Suppose, just as a matter of scientific research, we was to lock you in your cabin with the box of isotrium—open. They say it's nasty what happens to you, but of course some men have got to be martyrs to science. Well, Mister Harlan, what's your answer?"

BART was thinking quickly now. He knew he had to be convincing.

"I want ten thousand," he demanded.

"That's quite all right, Harlan. Ten thousand it is," said Driscoll swiftly—too swiftly.

"Second point. How am I to know you won't pitch me out as soon as I've shifted warps for you?"

Leshner smiled like a satisfied cat.

"Why, Mister Harlan, don't go putting ideas into our heads. I'm afraid the only thing you can do is trust us. I'd be glad to put it in writing, but that wouldn't be any help to you on the *Molly R*, would it now? So we'll have to consider it as a gentlemen's agreement. Does that satisfy you?"

"Third point," said Bart, deciding the risk was worth taking, "I'd like to know how the *Sphinx* is mixed up in all of this."

Their reaction to the question surprised him. He had expected blustering anger. Instead he saw faces grow pale. Morgan stepped back involuntarily. *Spaceman's superstition!* They'd pirated a ship, and now they were afraid to mention its name. For the first time in his life Bart fully realized how being out in space exaggerated the human mind's weakness for fears and taboos.

Leshner was the first to recover.

"Any more talk like that, Harlan, and we'll let Morgan do what he wants with you."

The fat engineer was repeating, "He's crazy, I tell you. Talks about rescuing ships. Crazy. They never come back, you fool! Do you hear me, they never come back!"

His voice rose to a hoarse yell, then abruptly broke off as he got control of himself.

"Come on," said Driscoll. "Let's get Harlan up front and start calculating the shift. Morgan, don't let yourself go like that. Call Wilson and have him keep a gun on Harlan every second."

"Shall we go forward, Mister Harlan?" murmured Leshner, picking up the automatic.

CHAPTER IV

RESCUE IN SPACE

"**I** TELL YOU, there's a jinx on the *Molly R.*"

Morgan was holding forth in the control room. The passage of three hours had not improved the condition of his nerves. On the surface the fat man seemed only obstinately argumentative, but Bart sensed that underneath lay fear. Morgan was talking to hide that fear.

All the crew members but the Kid and Captain Driscoll were in the control room. The Chinaman was in the pilot's seat, his immobile face fixed on the onrushing void. Wilson was dividing his attention between Bart and the radio. He kept the automatic close at hand. His double job made him irritable and he shifted about uneasily. Leshner was keeping tab on Bart's calculations, as far as he was able, and discussing the mechanical aspect of the warp-changing maneuver.

"We're jinxed," the engineer repeated, "and we're fools to be put-

ting our lives in the hands of a crazy, double-crossing navigator."

"Forget it, can't you?" whined Wilson petulantly.

Leshner raised his eyes from the table which Bart had littered with penciled theorems, and slips and graphs from the calculating machines.

"Yes, shut up, Morgan! Everything's O. K. And everything will be O. K. if you don't mess up the engines when we change warps. Which you're apt to do the way you're feeling. Go back to your bunk and try to pull yourself together."

"It is not good to talk of jinxes," muttered the Chinaman, making a quick, ritualistic gesture with his left hand. Bart had already learned that the oriental was a dimensionalist—a member of a pseudo-religious cult which professed to have established psychic communication with creatures and spirits in other dimensions of reality. The gesture was intended to ward off evil influences.

"I'm all right," said Morgan beligerently. "My nerves are like iron." But Bart noticed that his hands were trembling slightly.

For a time there was uncomfortable silence in the control room. It was broken when Wilson announced that he was getting a message from the ship behind them on the warp.

Leshner lifted his head.

"I didn't know there was any ship due to leave so soon," he said. "Who is she, Wilson?"

"The *University of Minnesota.*"

Leshner spun round in his chair.

"An S. C. C. boat, so help me!" he rasped. "What do they want with us?"

"Oh, nothing . . . nothing," replied Wilson jerkily. "Just wanted to say 'hello' and check our position."

"Just wanted to check our posi-

tion? That's all they would say. I don't like it," said Leshner. Then he stopped himself, seeming to realize the bad effect his words were having on the others' nerves, and changed his tone. "Though it's nothing to worry about, boys. We'll be off this warp in less than two hours, and then we can thumb our noses at all the S. C. C. boats in creation. I guess we must be going through a powerful thick belt of sub-cosmic rays right now. We've no other cause to feel jittery."

But Bart, pushing buttons on a calculator, could tell that these reassuring remarks did not have the effect on the others that Leshner desired. They seemed to strike a sour chord. The jumpiness of the crew gave Bart a feeling of hope. It meant they would be easier to deal with if a crisis came up. It occurred to him that he might be able to increase their nervousness. He directed a seemingly casual question at the Chinaman.

"Why did you say just now that it isn't good to talk of jinxes?"

"Because there are others who may hear—spirits from other dimensions of reality—creatures my forefathers knew dimly as demons," replied the leather-faced oriental, repeating the ritualistic gesture. "If they hear us talk of unlucky things that may happen, they seek to *make* them happen. They know the way to our world, though we do not know the way to theirs—except for the Master Dimensionalist."

"Now *he's* started," whined Wilson. "It's a lot of rot. Blooming rot."

"You mean," continued Bart innocently, "that even the empty space around us is filled with what you call spirits? That out there"—he pointed to the star sprinkled obser-

vation port—"there are things who are watching us?"

AS BART hoped, it was Morgan rather than the Chinaman who answered him.

"Don't start that!" yelled the engineer in a sudden spasm of trembling, which he tried to pass off as anger. "Don't start that or I'll kill you! Don't start talking about . . . about the ships that never come back."

Bart shrugged his shoulders, as if he hadn't any such matter in mind. Morgan subsided impotently, clenching his fists to hide the outward signs of his fear. Again silence descended on the control room, but it was a silence that ate at the nerves like an acid, a silence that fostered panic. Superstitions that could be laughed away on Earth took on a monstrous and compulsive reality in the isolation of interplanetary space. Even Leshner had trouble in concentrating on the results of Bart's calculations.

After about ten minutes Wilson began to mutter, and to adjust and readjust the dials of the radio.

"I don't know what it is," he said in answer to Leshner's question. "It's very faint. No, it's not the S. C. C. ship. There, it's coming a little louder now. No, curse it, I've lost it again."

"Maybe the ship ahead of us on the warp?"

Wilson, fumbling with the dials, shook his head.

"No, I don't think so. Somehow the sound doesn't have warp quality. It's . . . queer."

"What do you mean, it hasn't warp quality?" Leshner interrogated jerkily. "It's *got* to have warp quality. We're a sight too far from Earth to be reached by radio except along the warp, so help me. You're imagin-

ing things. Turn up the amplifier and let's all hear it."

An eerie murmuring filled the control room. There was a varying cadence about it that suggested speech, though it was too low and confused with static for individual words to be intelligible. But something about the tone and pitch of it sent Bart's heart pounding. He looked at the other men, and saw fear on the faces of the Chinaman and Morgan. The latter was squeaking, "What's that word it's saying? What's that word it's saying?"

Suddenly the static lifted and the voice came through, loud and clear. It filled the control room.

"Space Ship Sphinx calling. Space Ship Sphinx calling."

MORGAN'S fat body quaked convulsively in panic. There was a gurgling sound in his throat. Then he ran aft, stumbling. Wilson, moved by irrational fear, grabbed up the automatic. A wild exaltation filled Bart, for he recognized Ann's voice; yet at the same time he felt curiously calm, as if he were playing at a game of skill with the crew of the *Molly R* and waiting his chance to make a decisive move. He watched the drawn faces of Lesher and Wilson. He heard the Chinaman numbling wildly about "voices from another dimension."

The meteor finder began to jangle raucously. Wilson almost dropped the automatic. Captain Driscoll's voice came faintly from aft, barking questions. The jangling increased swiftly in volume. Bart guessing its meaning, strained his eyes at the observation port.

Lesher shouted at the Chinaman, "Bend warp, you fool! Bend warp!"

The Chinaman lost his head. In-

stead of bending warp, he decreased speed, yanking levers violently. He decreased speed much too quickly. Inertia pulled at them with sickening force. Wilson pitched forward across the floor. Lesher, halfway to the pilot's seat, was forced to cling to an anchored table for support. Bart did likewise. For three full minutes inertia gripped them tight, dragged at their flesh, made their veins stand out. The Chinaman was pressed against the control board. The jangling of the meteor finder had become an earsplitting din. Finally the torment lessened.

Then things happened with a startling rapidity, though to Bart it seemed almost slow, he saw each action so clearly. Captain Driscoll came staggering up the corridor, a gun in one hand, blood dripping from a gash in his cheek. Wilson half rose to his feet, holding his head and whimpering. Lesher struggled to pull the Chinaman off the controls.

Then Bart saw *it*. The thing loomed up like an illusion—so close to the *Molly R* that it half obscured the observation port. Parts of the battered hull reflected blinding glitters of sunlight; others were in so deep shadow as to be invisible. It was a picture impossible on earth—all highlights, weird, frightening.

"Look," cried Bart, seizing his chance, "Look! It's the *Sphinx*!"

The others turned to the port. The sight of the hulk, hanging there magnified and unreal, changed confusion into panic. The Chinaman threw Lesher to one side and fled. Wilson followed him. Together they bowled over Driscoll and carried him along with them. The control room was empty save for Bart and Lesher. A few steps brought Bart to the door through which the others had fled. He slammed it shut and shoved the

bolts into place. Then he turned to deal with Leshar.

The veteran pilot had meanwhile managed to escape the grip of terror and drag his eyes away from the monstrous hulk of the *Sphinx*. He came at Bart with a rush, swinging his hook up at Bart's jaw, like a fisherman trying to catch a game-fish through the gills. The hook gouged Bart's chin, but failed to catch the jawbone. He stepped to one side, tripped Leshar with his foot, at the same time swinging a blow at his back. Leshar's head hit the floor with a sickening thump and his body went limp. Bart knew that for the time being he was master of the *Molly R*.

HE NOTED that the derelict *Sphinx* was slowly floating past them, and set the controls so that the *Molly R* backed warp at the same rate of speed. In that way he kept the two ships approximately abreast, though about fifty yards apart. Then he went to the radio and attempted to talk with Ann. He could get no reply, although he continued to hear her voice at short intervals monotonously repeating the four words "*Space Ship Sphinx calling.*" His eyes narrowed. Evidently she could send, but not receive.

Just then Ann began a coherent message.

"The *Sphinx* was boarded by pirates from the *Molly R*. They murdered the entire crew, including Professor Wilkerson. They . . ." Then her voice broke. "I can't send much longer," came the faint words. "Oxygen running low . . . soon exhausted . . . intense cold . . . for the present, this is Ann Wilkerson . . . signing off."

Bart beat his palm with his fist. He knew he could not grapple the

Sphinx, since the grapples were located and operated from amidships. Yet he could not delay. Ann, he thought, might be near death . . . horribly frightened . . . alone. There was only one way. He must cross over in a space suit.

Having reached this decision, his movements became precise and efficient. He silenced the bell of the meteorite finder. He taped the unconscious Leshar's arms and feet. He locked the ship's controls. He calculated it would take Driscoll and his crew at least fifteen minutes to cut through the bolted door, once they had recovered from their panic.

Scooping up the automatic Wilson had dropped, he returned to the radio and attempted to contact the S. C. C. ship travelling behind them on the warp. He couldn't raise their operator. Not wasting an instant, he put a fresh metal tape in the attached phonographic device and cut the following message: "*Space Ship Molly R* stalled on warp 17, about 3,257,300 miles from Earth. Aboard are the wreckers of Wilkerson's *Sphinx*. I temporarily have them locked up aft. They are desperate. Take all precautions in boarding us. Meanwhile I am attempting to rescue a survivor from the *Sphinx* which is floating derelict near our warp. Navigator Harlan sending. This is a phonographic message."

He set the radio to broadcast his call at half minute intervals, hoping against hope that it would be believed; he knew that the detail about the derelict *Sphinx* would raise doubts in the mind of the average spaceman. Perhaps he shouldn't have mentioned it. But there was no time now to make a change. He glanced at the clock. Five minutes gone, and still no sounds to indicate

that Driscoll and the others were cutting at the bolted door.

Jerking a space suit from a locker, he made his way to the emergency port, which consisted of two hermetic doors with a valve chamber between them in which the pressure could be decreased slowly. Getting into the suit, he shifted the automatic to an outer pocket. Then a thought occurred to him. He went to the locker where tools and spare parts were kept and selected a dozen heavy rods and wrenches. With these he filled the other pockets. As he was adjusting his glass-synthetic helmet he spared another glance for the clock. Three more minutes gone. From behind the bolted door there began to well up the characteristic muffled roar of an oxy-acetylene torch. Fifteen minutes to go. He hurried into the valve chamber and adjusted the air-control to decrease pressure at the highest possible rate of speed.

His head swam. He fought to retain consciousness. The gage went down, down, finally hit bottom. He was in a comparative vacuum. His blood, confined only by the relatively weak air-pressure his suit could generate, pounded in his arteries. Then, suddenly, the red spots stopped dancing in front of his eyes, and his head cleared. He opened the outer door.

Before and beneath him was black, starry emptiness. Poised about fifty yards off was the torn hull of the *Sphinx*, transfigured by the sun, which Bart could not yet see, into a mass of grotesque highlights. He noted that the stern showed a smooth, unbroken surface. That was where he could expect to find Ann, and so that was where he would have to direct his jump.

BART KNEW that at this distance from the sun and from any planet, gravitational attraction was negligible. Nevertheless, the fact that he was still in the artificial gravitation system of the *Molly R* gave him the eerie feeling that he would fall straight down as soon as he sprang from the outer port. With an effort he conquered the inhibition, poised himself, and gave a vigorous push, as if he were making a standing broadjump.

Space received him. The sudden loss of gravity and weight made it seem like diving into water. Then he was out of the shadow of the *Molly R*. The sudden blast of harsh, unrefracted sunlight was almost like a physical blow. He saw the *Sphinx* rushing at him. He clutched the meteorite cushioning before the rebound had a chance to drive him away. Edging his way along, he reached the stern without finding any entry. It was agonizingly slow work, especially when he thought of Driscoll and his desperate crew at work on the connecting door. Pausing, he took a large wrench out of his pocket and began to pound on the hull; the sound, transmitted by the metal, might reach Ann. Then he started back on the other side. He had gotten no more than a few feet when he noticed an open emergency port ahead of him. The helmet of a space suit was projecting from it. Sunlight revealed the face in the helmet. It was Ann's. In a few moments Bart was beside her.

But there was no time for him to try to read the words her lips were forming, nor to drink in the wild, startled beauty of her white face and reddish golden hair, which made an incredibly exotic picture against the background of stabbingly brilliant stars. Now that the first part of

his mission was accomplished, his mind was dominated by the thought of an oxy-acetylene flame hungrily eating its way through a metal door. How long had he been gone? Eight minutes? Ten? Twelve? He quickly put his arm around Ann and started to worm his way over the hull. It never once occurred to him there might be another survivor aboard. When she tried to hold back, he remorselessly broke her grip, and pulled her after him. He attributed her actions to panic, and he knew there was no time to reason with her, even if he were able to make himself heard.

As he pushed off toward the *Molly R*, holding Ann tight to his side, his foot slipped against the meteorite cushioning. This changed the direction of his push and he saw that they were going to miss the *Molly R* and careen beyond it into the void. Using his free hand, he took a heavy connecting rod out of his pocket and hurled it with all his might in a direction exactly opposite that of the *Molly R*. He did the same with another rod and a large wrench. It worked. The force of *reaction* changed the direction of their course. They swung around in a broken curve, and he managed to clutch the open door of the valve chamber. It was the work of a moment to get inside. Then his feverish fingers sought the air control, and the pressure began to mount. He did not wait for it to equalize completely with the pressure inside the control room, so when he got the inner door open it swung outward with a bang and narrowly missed hitting him. Then they were inside. All this while he had hardly spared a glance for Ann.

Fingering the explosive-bullet automatic with his clumsy gloves,

Bart looked around quickly and could see no change, save for a dull glow around the lock of the door leading aft, which showed where the oxy-acetylene torch was at work. Lesher still seemed to be in the same position on the floor. Bart looked at the clock and saw he had scarcely been gone eight minutes. He smiled grimly as he started to unloose his helmet. Then he heard Ann's voice. Now that they were in atmosphere again, it would carry through her space suit.

"Oh, Bart," she was saying. "I've been trying to tell you. Lucy's in the *Sphinx*. Our air supply was almost exhausted when I heard your tapping and went to investigate. I couldn't get her to come to the port with me. She may be suffocating by now. I tried and tried to tell you."

CHAPTER V

VICTORY

IT WAS a moment before the meaning of her words filtered through to Bart's intelligence, before he realized how completely he had misinterpreted her words about the death of her father and the entire crew. He felt like an athlete who, at the end of a gruelling mile run, is told he must begin another race in two minutes.

Ann noticed Lesher's motionless form. Her eyes went wide in horror and surprise.

"That man," she managed to say. "That man . . . the same one . . ."

Bart understood. He slipped off his helmet and went close to her. He started to undo the fastenings of her suit, then changed his mind.

"Ann," he said, "you've got to understand. As you see, this is the *Molly R*, the ship that pirated the

Sphinx. Before I learned that, I'd signed as navigator. I had a wild notion of persuading them to attempt to rescue the *Sphinx*. Then I found out the truth. Ann, that man with the hook is helpless. The rest of the crew are locked aft. Take this gun, and shoot to kill if they burn their way through the door. Keep your space suit on. It might be necessary to abandon ship quickly. I'll put in a fresh canister of oxygen; here it is. I've got to go back and get Lucy. And you . . . you have to trust me."

Ann stared at him, trying to piece together what he was saying. It all seemed so incredible to her, like a queer mixture of dream and reality. Bart's appearance . . . her rescue . . . Lucy's plight . . . and then this ship and that man with the hook. But after a moment she saw what she must do, and nodded her head in sudden determination and gripped the automatic firmly.

Before replacing his own helmet, Bart hurried over to the control panel and switched on the ship's individual sound system.

"Driscoll!" he shouted. "Driscoll! If you manage to burn a hole in that door I'll spray a dozen explosive bullets through it. I don't care what happens to the *Molly R*. I'm giving you fair warning."

To his relief he heard the roar of the torch die away. He didn't hope to stop them, but he figured they might delay a few minutes making preparations for a gun fight before they went back to work on the door. And he desperately needed those minutes.

Then he was back in the valve chamber. In a pocket of his space suit was an extra oxygen canister and a flashlight. Again he lowered pressure rapidly, and this time he had to fight harder to keep from go-

ing under. With a sickening fear, he realized that the nervous strain was beginning to tell on him. After the air gage hit bottom it took him longer to recover than it had on his first trip. Everything seemed to take longer, to require a greater exertion of will power. On the first trip he had been thinking chiefly of Ann. Now he lacked that incentive and found himself weighing dangers. Moreover, he was leaving Ann behind, in deadly peril. He found that it took a distinct effort to open the outer door. And when he stared into the black abyss, his knees shook and the cold seemed to cut through him like a frosty knife.

"Can't waste a second. Can't waste a second," he kept mumbling to himself.

HE NOTED that the derelict had drifted fifteen or twenty yards further away. The distance looked enormous. As he bent his legs and pushed off he felt that it was the action of a terrible nightmare—not of sane reality. Then he found his hands clutching meteorite cushionings, and his fear left him.

He climbed directly over the hull this time, making straight for the open port. He waited for a moment to switch on his flashlight, and then pushed in. It was like a diver entering a ship on the deep ocean bottom. His flashlight made a spot of brightness on the opposite wall . . . nothing more.

Lucy's eyes were closed when he found her. Unconscious or dead, he thought mechanically, as he replaced her used-up oxygen canister with the fresh one. He cursed because his fingers fumbled and slipped as he screwed it tight and adjusted the valve. Half his thoughts were on another girl . . . Lucy's face began

to blur under his anxious eyes, and Bart had to fight down another spasm of nervous weakness.

Getting out the port and up over the hull was a maddeningly slow business. It was difficult towing Lucy, because she could not adjust herself to his movements. Halfway over the hull he sensed an independent movement from her. The next moment he was involved in a grotesque struggle with a panic stricken girl who kicked and squirmed convulsively. Her eyes were the white-rimmed orbs of stark terror. He caught a glimpse of blood about her mouth, where she had bitten her lip. He managed to hold her away from the hull so she could find nothing to grip but his arm.

When Bart finally saw the *Molly R*, his heart sank. The off-warp drift of the *Sphinx* was increasing rapidly and now fully one hundred yards separated the two ships. Lucy managed to touch the hull at the last moment, and her struggles greatly altered the direction of his push, so that they were headed for a point forty feet from the *Molly R*. One after another he threw away his remaining wrenches and heavy rods, using all the force at his command. Reaction gradually rectified their course, but he could see they were going to miss contact by a few scant inches. He knew that struggling wouldn't shift their direction one iota. At the last second he remembered his flashlight. It plummeted off, and his free hand closed on a fixture of the grapple housing.

This time he had struck the *Molly R* amidships and he had to work his way forward, avoiding the ports for fear they might be noticed. But when he reached the control room section he spared a glance on a small side porthole. His horror stricken

eyes remained glued to what he saw. Leshar was free and struggling with Ann. "Fool, fool," thought Bart, "to forget his claw could cut through any tape that confined his arms!" Evidently Leshar had managed to surprise Ann, for she had dropped her gun and was clinging with both hands to the arm which bore the claw. Her space suit protected her somewhat from his blows and kicks, but it was an unequal struggle. Soon he would free his claw to tear and rip.

NO TIME to operate the valve chamber. No time to struggle with Lucy. It meant danger to Ann and them all, but it was the only way. He swung Lucy against the interweave, saw her clutch and hold. Then he was yanking himself forward into the valve chamber at a reckless pace. He did not quite close the outer door, but kept tight hold of its handle with his left hand. With his right he worked speedily at the lock of the inner door, keeping as far away from it as he could.

It slammed open with a great crash. The sudden rush of escaping air drove the outer door wide open and Bart with it. The force of the blast whipped his body out so that it was at right angles to the hull. If it hadn't been for his grip on the outer door he would have been blown away from the ship altogether. A flurry of papers—the ones bearing the calculations for the warp-shifting maneuver — swept out through the port. Then came Leshar, powerless in the grip of the momentary hurricane, his eyes already beginning to bulge in a ghastly way from the sudden decrease in air pressure. He was clutching at his throat. Bart's eyes, drawn by a morbid fascination, followed him. The pilot's

body shot rapidly off into space, surrounded by the flurry of papers. Now that they were in an almost perfect vacuum, papers and man both moved at the same rate of speed—diminishing black shapes against the stars, save where the sun made fantastic highlights.

That sight had the same effect on Bart as if he were plunged from a frightening dream into an even deeper nightmare—so deep that he did not remember his actions for the next few minutes. His last thought was that Ann, protected by her space suit, must have been able to hold on to something and keep from being blown out of the control room. But he was also aware that a space suit could not have shielded her completely from the physiological effects of the sudden change in pressure.

When consciousness began to come back to Bart, he was inside the control room and fumbling with the fastenings of his space suit. He only vaguely knew where he was. The first thing he saw was the clock. He noted that the minute hand had moved a quarter of the way around the dial since he'd last looked at it. What had happened? Wasn't there something important connected with the clock? He tried to remember. His mind was dazed. The vision of Lesh's body rocketing out into space came back to him, and he winced. He felt a twinge of pain where Lesh's hook had gouged his jaw. He raised his hand to his cheek and was dully surprised when it encountered the smooth glass-synthetic of his helmet.

His slow, struggling thoughts shifted from Lesh to the rest of the crew. He turned around and looked stupidly at the door leading aft. A circular section of the metal glowed cherry red. In the center of

this section was a small hole in which another metal was bubbling and fuming like very thick liquid rubber. That must be tungsten-plastic, he thought. Its presence puzzled him. What was tungsten-plastic doing here? Why had they closed the hole they had made with the torch?

Then he remembered. He had emptied the control room of air to save Ann. At about the same time Driscoll and the others must have cut through—and immediately been forced to close the hole to keep air in the after part of the ship. In his mind's eye he pictured the sort of patch they'd made: a small metal plate sealed down over the hole with a great blob of tungsten-plastic.

But Ann. What had happened to Ann?

IT WAS as if some obstruction snapped in his mind, and memory came back with a rush. He looked rapidly around him. Ann was lying on the floor near the control board. Lucy was kneeling beside her and shaking her. Both girls still wore their space suits. And, even as Bart watched, he saw Ann's lips part and quiver, saw her eyelids flutter open. She had come through!

As he moved to help Lucy, he figured out what he had done during the blank in his memory. He noted that the door of the valve chamber was locked shut. The quality of the light told him the control room was once more filled with air; a glance at the pressure gage confirmed this. He could hardly believe it, yet he realized that while he was unconscious or "space mad" he must have rescued Lucy from where he had left her clinging to the outer hull; further, he must have brought her into the control room, locked the valve

chamber, and reopened the ventilators which had automatically shut when the pressure fell.

He helped Lucy undo the fastenings of Ann's helmet and her own. Ann's eyes sought his. She gripped his hand feebly, and managed a smile. He soon convinced himself that she had not been seriously injured, and that with a little rest she ought soon to recover. Then, ignoring Lucy's questions, he made for the radio. His phonographic message was still sending. He switched it off and spoke into the mike.

"Navigator Harlan speaking. Can you hear me, *University of Minnesota*?"

"Thank God, sir," came the immediate reply. "I was beginning to think you were done for. You still have the crew locked aft?"

"Yes, but I can't tell for how long."

"We're coming at top speed. Is your position the same?"

"Yes. 3,257,300 miles out, approximately."

"Then we're still about 500,000 miles short. Can you back-warp to meet us?"

"I don't dare to. It would give the crew a chance to gum up the motors and wreck us."

"Of course. In any case we ought to be up with you in about half an hour. How did you know they had wrecked the *Sphinx*?"

"They partly revealed it to me themselves, thinking I would aid in their escape. And I've seen a square black box with Professor Wilkerson's initials on it."

He heard a flurry of excited conversation at the other end, and a man's voice—not the operator's—saying, "That may be the isotrium."

Then the operator questioning,

"Do you mean a box, or just a black valise?"

"I mean a square black box," said Bart. "I'd never seen anything just like it before. The material it was made of puzzled me. Looked like solid carbon."

"That's it!" came the second voice, and then something sounding like "But I can't believe it because of the other thing he said."

THERE FOLLOWED a pause. Apparently they were conferring. When Bart heard the operator again, the man sounded hesitant.

"One other thing, Harlan. I believe we got part of your phonographic message wrong. The way it sounded to us, you spoke of sighting the *Sphinx*."

"I did. You didn't get it wrong."

"But man, that's impossible."

"It's true nevertheless. And I can prove . . ."

"But I tell you it's impossible. No lost ship can be found. The *Sphinx* was utterly destroyed."

Bart struggled to keep his temper. He knew he was fighting against accepted scientific theory.

"Listen," he said, "I can prove it. I not only found the *Sphinx*, but I also rescued the two survivors—Wilkerson's daughters, Ann and Lucy. Do you want to talk with them?"

Another pause. Bart called to Lucy to come to the radio if she could leave Ann. In a moment she was beside him.

Just then the second voice spoke to Bart directly. It was dry and matter-of-fact.

"Listen, Harlan, I am Carlstrom of the Scientists' Central Committee. I think I know you. You're the Harlan who was expelled from I. I. E. N., aren't you? Frankly, I can't be-

lieve your story. What you say about the ill-fated *Sphinx* prevents me from taking you seriously. I presume from what you last said that you have a female accomplice who will attempt to imitate the voice of one or both of Professor Wilkerson's daughters. Harlan, I don't know what motives you have for this deception, but let me tell you that you can't get away with it. Frankly, I have serious doubts of . . ."

Lucy cut in excitedly.

"Professor Carlstrom, you've got to believe us. We *were* rescued from the *Sphinx*. It's true what he says, all true."

At this Carlstrom seemed to be taken aback. His voice was uncertain when he spoke again.

"I can't believe you are Lucy Wilkerson."

"But I am. Why, Professor Carlstrom, do you remember how you visited us just about six weeks ago, and you and father spent the evening discussing the properties of isotrium, and I asked you questions about your work in the antarctic?"

Bart saw that Ann was standing beside him and Lucy. He put out his hand to support her, but she didn't need it.

"Professor Carlstrom," she said in an eager voice, "you must try to satisfy your doubts. Any further proof you demand, we can give. Only no time must be lost in getting us out of this terrible ship. Every minute increases our danger."

Carlstrom's voice was strident with excitement.

"Listen, Ann—if you are Ann Wilkerson—answer me one question. It's something no stranger could know. What was the real cause of your mother's death?"

"She died while collaborating with my father in his attempts to isolate

isotrium," replied Ann in a hollow whisper. "It was completely hushed up. Her death coincided with the successful isolation of isotrium-beta. It was later diagnosed as isotrium poisoning, type three."

Carlstrom's "By Heaven, it checks!" seemed more an involuntary exclamation than a statement. "Listen, Ann and Lucy, we're coming at top speed. I still can't believe what Harlan says, but I *trust* you. In less than half an hour we'll lay alongside the *Molly R* and . . ."

BART was no longer listening. He had just received a disquieting shock. Through the opposite space port, dim because of the double refraction of iso-quartz and glass-synthetic, he had seen the malignant face of the Kid. His mind set rapidly to work reconstructing the activities of Driscoll and the others. Probably they had never guessed that he had left the control room. Therefore, when air began to suck through the hole they had cut, it had very likely convinced them that both Bart and Leshner were dead. Rather than take any chances, they had hustled the Kid into a space suit and sent him out through the aft valve chamber to find out what sort of leak the control room had sprung and if it could be repaired. Now that they knew the truth, they would undoubtedly recommence their cutting at the door.

"Ann," said Bart, "You and Lucy stick to the radio. Keep in contact with Carlstrom, so we can let him know of any unforeseen developments. Don't bother to take off the rest of your space suits; it's just possible we may need them in a hurry."

Then a frightening thought occurred to him, and he hurried to valve

chamber and doubled bolted the door securely from the inside. That would prevent the Kid from playing the same trick on him that he had played on Lesher. Bart's mind had become a hotbed of fears. Wasn't it just barely possible, he thought, that Driscoll might try to flood the control room with some kind of poison gas? The chemicals available on a space ship would make it easy to manufacture cyanogen or odorless phosgene. Rather than take a chance, he jammed the ventilators shut. He and Ann and Lucy could easily get along for half an hour on stale air. If the worst came to the worst, they could always resume their helmets. Mightn't it be better to do that right away, and empty the control room of air as a protection? He decided against it. It would be too great a strain on Ann, and it would make cooperation with the *University of Minnesota* very difficult. Moreover, he had used the trick once; the others were undoubtedly prepared for it.

Within five minutes after he had sighted the Kid's face, he heard the sound of the oxy-acetylene torch. He repeated his warnings to Driscoll over the ship's sound system. But the answer was a bloodcurdling laugh which he recognized as Morgan's, followed by an almost unintelligible jumble of curses and threats. He thought he could make out the words, "... burn you, like Lesher said."

Bart secured the explosive-bullet automatic he had given to Ann, and directed the girls to take a crouching position near the radio and out of the line of fire. He sensed that both were near the breaking point.

The minutes dragged slowly on. The metal door glowed more and more brightly. The *University of*

Minnesota kept announcing its rapid changes in position as it approached. It was a race between the S. C. C. ship and the torch, but the torch was winning. Soon a tiny hole appeared in the door, and through it the bluish, incandescent flame hissed like a serpent's tongue. Bart's nervously exhausted mind kept picturing the five faces on the other side—so vividly that it seemed almost like a kind of clairvoyance. The hate-laden, swinish eyes of Morgan; the baleful glare of the superstitious Chinaman; the chalk-white face of the Kid, its mouth twisted into a nasty grimace; the set features and thin, fear-pursed lips of Wilson; the malefic, pale eyes of Driscoll, light blue like the flame of the torch—Bart felt that he saw them all, that waves of murderous hate were emanating from them and beating against his brain. Five desperate men, driven almost insane with rage, uncertainty, and panic. He almost wished that Lesher were still with them. Lesher at least would have had the force of character to control them, to fight down their hysteria.

THE HOLE grew in size, became a horizontal cut; then another cut at right angles, and then another. The flame moved implacably. When the *University of Minnesota* was still one hundred thousand miles away, an incandescent square of metal fell with a dull clang to the floor. Simultaneously a bullet sang past Bart's head and splattered against the wall. Bart replied, sending three bullets through the opening, one on top of the other. He heard a shriek of pain, and saw a metal plate lifted into place to bar the opening. Stalemate!

But that was not long the case. He had estimated only too well the mad

desperation of the men he was up against. For he heard Driscoll's voice shouting faintly.

"Harlan, don't think we haven't guessed by now that you're an agent of the S. C. C. Listen, we've got a box of isotrium in here. Harlan, that stuff is a thousand times more powerful than radium. It kills any man who's near it and not protected by metal. If you won't surrender, you and those women with you, we're going to dump it through the opening. Think fast, Harlan. It's not a nice death."

"Don't let him do it, Bart," cried Ann wildly. "He only knows the minor properties of isotrium—things that have been published in magazines. If he takes it out of its container, it will destroy the whole ship. Melt it down to cold electrons. Stop him!"

But it was Driscoll's voice that answered her.

"Don't think you can fool us with a lot of fairy tales. We'll see to it that *we're* protected. You're going to get it. Right away."

"Quick!" hissed Bart. "We've got to abandon ship. Tell Carlstrom. Put on your helmets. It's the only hope. Driscoll's crazy enough to do what he says."

"Think fast, Harlan," came the voice through the door. "We're about to give it to you."

As they entered the valve chamber, they saw the plate that covered the hole lifted slightly aside. Within fifteen seconds they were pushing off from the ship. This time the *Sphinx* was a good two hundred yards away, but Ann and Lucy pushed with him and they crossed the gap. Then they turned to watch the *Molly R*. What they saw etched itself indelibly on their minds.

At first they noted no change.

Then gradually the forward part of the ship began to glow pale green, as if it had been lightly brushed with radium. The glow grew in intensity and spread to the after part of the ship, until the entire hull gleamed coldly, like some monstrous, phosphorescent fish from the lightless ocean deeps. There was no sparkle, no shimmering, no pulsation—only an implacably intensifying glow. But the awesome change did not end there. Slowly the *Molly R* became semi-transparent. It looked like a ship of luminous glass. Bart could vaguely discern the outlines of the compartment walls and of the motors and the various fixtures. For a moment he thought he saw movement. Tiny forms of men rushing frantically about like trapped insects. Dissolving men of glass seeking escape from a dissolving ship. Then there came an acceleration in the incredible process. Stars became visible through the hull. Swiftly the glow decreased in intensity. The outlines of the *Molly R* became vague and mistlike. Soon what had been a space ship was no more than a vague luminescence—a nebulousity that might have been as distant as the milky way. Then it was gone.

THEY were alone in the cosmic blackness, which the brilliance of the stars and the harsh light of the sun, with its fantastically flaming corona, served only to emphasize and intensify. Bart realized that his breath was coming in heavy and measured gasps—such was the spell of evil fascination the vanishing of the *Molly R* had cast on him. He clasped Ann closer and felt her shivering through the clumsy thickness of the space suits. By what a narrow margin, he thought, had *they* escaped the fate of Morgan and the

Chinaman, of Wilson, the Kid, and Captain Driscoll; save for the high vacuum between the two ships the cataclysmic action of the isotrium might readily have passed from the *Molly R* to the *Sphinx*. His gaze idly roamed the empty cosmos. Near the sun he noted two tiny crescents, the larger greenish, the smaller silver. Those were the Earth and the Moon.

Then full realization of their predicament came to them. Only the S. C. C. ship *University of Minnesota* stood between them and certain death from suffocation or cold. Would they sight the derelict? It was more likely that, not finding the *Molly R*, they would continue on their way, suspecting a plot or an elaborate hoax. He felt despair take root in him. He felt the cold sucking hungrily at him.

Ann and Lucy were both pulling at him, trying to attract his attention, pointing toward the Earth. At first he did not understand what they were trying to convey. Then he saw it too—a dull star that lay in the same direction as Earth—but *inside* the blackness of the unilluminated part of Earth's disk! It wavered—it moved—it grew momentarily brighter. It could only be the *University of Minnesota*, traveling along the warp at a reduced rate of speed now it had reached the zone in which it expected to find the *Molly R*. Bart fumbled in his pocket for the explosive-bullet automatic, set the control for the bullets to explode at a range of two hundred yards. The *University of Minnesota* had almost reached them. He aimed carefully at a spot about one hundred yards ahead of its prow and fired once, twice, three times. The bullets flashed like rockets as they burst.

The *University of Minnesota* drove

past, then began to decrease speed, stopped, and slowly back-warped. They saw heads outlined against the portholes. Slim telescopic grapples reached out for them.

An hour later, Ann, Lucy, and Bart were sitting in Carlstrom's cabin, and the S. C. C. ship was headed back for Earth.

"We know so little of space," the distinguished scientist was saying. "We are like children blundering around in the dark. To think that today I have witnessed the first rescue of a lost ship. It is a milestone in the history of extraterrestrial navigation. And you, Harlan, were expelled from I. I. E. N.?"

"That's right, I'm afraid."

Carlstrom rubbed his wrinkled cheek reflectively, and smiled.

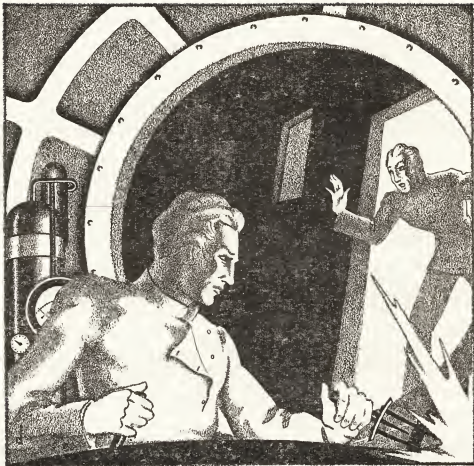
"Well, Harlan, that just goes to show what mistakes we old fellows make sometimes. Of course, it was as much your faith in your theory as the theory itself that found the *Sphinx*. The S. C. C. were interested in the *Molly R* and had ordered the authorities to hold it pending an investigation. When we learned it had nevertheless left Earth, I was detailed to follow it to Mars. Well, it is gone now, and the isotrium with it. But we can talk of those matters later. Now you all need rest and further medical attention."

"I still feel it's all a dream," said Lucy, shivering and smiling all at once. "I keep thinking I'll wake up aboard the wreck of the *Sphinx*."

Carlstrom shook his head sadly.

"Science lost a great man when your father perished. I know how it must grieve you. Now, Miss Lucy and Miss Ann, you'll be alone in the world, won't you?"

The sisters nodded their heads, but Ann's eyes sought Bart's, and found them.



THE TIME MAKER

by R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

(Author of "Status Quo," "Copheid Planet," etc.)

There was so little time left to find the secret of the strange new plague—yet, Dr. Bellamy's machine held the key to all the time in the universe.

THE DAY had a feeling of darkness. The streets were deserted. A deathly quiet seemed to wrap the city.

Along the thoroughfare, toward Grosley Square, walked a postman, masked and bundled in airtight clothing. His eyes glanced toward the

houses on his route. Some of them were deserted. Others had red placards announcing quarantine on their doors. Only a few places showed signs of life.

A huge van purred along Yprus Avenue toward the square, sending the morning mists into vaporous

whirlpools in its wake. Long oblong boxes rattled in the truck. *Coffins!* And they were not empty.

The postman turned his head and walked to the next house.

A silvery ray of helium light streamed through a half-pulled blind. The postman noticed this. He hesitated, stooped and peered through the window, straining himself to see inside. At last he turned and touched the doorbell with his gloved hand.

The door swung open, revealing the pale, harried features of a butler.

"I saw a light," the postman said. "I wondered if Dr. Dailey—"

"He's all right," the butler replied. "He's been working all night with a friend. Forgot to turn off the light."

"Oh." There was a note of relief in the postman's voice. "He's onto something then? He's going to find out how to cure The Disease?"

The butler shook his head. "Can't say. It's like this every day, but nothing ever comes of it. Sometimes I think he is as far as he ever was from the answer. No one knows what causes The Disease. Even the ultra-microscope won't show the virus, if it is a virus. Quarantine won't help. There's no prevention. No cure. You just get it or you don't."

"There's one man that'll find the answer! The morning paper said Dr. Bellamy had a clue—"

"Dr. Bellamy is here with Dr. Dailey now."

"See! They *are* onto something!" The postman was jubilant. "Maybe some of us will live through this thing!"

The butler shrugged. "I wouldn't bet."

The postman seemed to remember the envelope he held in his hand. He held it toward the butler.

"Here's something for Dr. Dailey."

The butler took the envelope. It

was addressed in a glistening black ink and there was no return address on the outside.

"IT isn't a virus, Roger. It isn't a germ, nor a micro-organism of any sort. I'm positive it's a condition. A chemical reaction that goes on within the body. If we can find the cause, then we can stamp out The Disease overnight!" John Bellamy was pacing the floor in front of Dr. Dailey's desk. He was a huge, towering man, not quite forty; he wore loose clothing that made him look more of a giant than he really was.

John's face was flushed from excitement and loss of sleep. In the far corner of the room, lighted by a helium vapor lamp, stood a laboratory table fitted with an ultra-microscope and an array of test tubes and reagents.

"The plague areas of the city suggest an epidemic and that The Disease can be transmitted from one individual to another, John," Roger Dailey insisted. "Of course, I'd gladly agree that it's a condition—like cancer or diabetes—if there was a shred of evidence to substantiate it. But the periodicity of the attacks suggest an incubation period—like malaria."

"It's the periodicity that suggests a condition, Roger. There's a gradual rise in the number of seizures through the day. A falling off between five and six o'clock in the afternoon. Another slight rise early in the night, tapering at midnight, and virtually no seizures in the early morning hours. It fluctuates with the weather, with more cases on cold, dark days, than on sunny ones. It suggests our manner of living."

"Then why does it attack dogs, cats and rats as well as human beings?"

Roger was a small, wiry, gray-haired man. He looked through his spectacles with keen, blue eyes.

John sat down across the desk from his colleague. He took a piece of paper and searched his pockets for a pencil.

"Here's a fountain pen!" Roger Dailey held the object toward John Bellamy, who took it and removed the cap.

He drew a rough graph on the paper in the black glistening ink.

"Funny sort of stuff," John said, as he watched the ink dry immediately.

"One of my own inventions. I was going to put it on the market, but the epidemic changed my plans. Later, perhaps."

"See, this graph represents twenty-four hours—"

John was interrupted as the pale-faced butler stepped into the room. He handed the letter the postman had left to Dr. Dailey, who glanced at the handwriting on the envelope.

"Ho! It's addressed in my ink!" he said. "Look, John—"

But Roger Dailey never finished his sentence. A startling change had come over John Bellamy. The massive, flushed face was suddenly drained to a pallid white. The gigantic body was shaking with convulsive shudders.

"My God! I've got it, Roger!" gasped the younger scientist, as he sank to the floor.

The Disease had struck again.

JOHN BELLAMY opened his eyes. He was in the familiar surroundings of his own little apartment on the outskirts of the city. A familiar face was bending over him.

"Roger!" he exclaimed. "You shouldn't be here! I've got The Disease."

"You said yourself that it wasn't communicable."

"That was only a theory, Roger. We don't know. It might be. You mustn't take the risk."

"The only way we have to find out is to expose someone. If I catch The Disease from you, it's communicable. If I don't it isn't. At least we'll know that much more than we knew before."

John Bellamy laughed weakly. The two scientists had reversed their positions. "I'm sure now that neither one of us knows anything about it. How long was I out?"

"One hour, exactly."

John whistled. "A short period. That gives me just ten hours of life left."

Roger Dailey nodded grimly. The length of the first attack was always proportional to the time before death struck. For every hour of unconsciousness during the first attack ten hours of life remained before the final attack. This was one of the first properties of The Disease science had discovered.

"We've got to work fast."

"There's a chance, Roger, that we can gain some time. Remember the experiment I was working on before the epidemic?" John Bellamy nodded toward his laboratory door, just off the bedroom.

"You mean your crazy idea about time travel?"

"It wasn't time travel, Roger. I'm inclined to agree with you that if future events are dependent upon the past, then it is unlikely for a man to go back into the past. But there is a method of delaying the future—to gain time without using it. When a man has only ten hours of life left, even a second gained means something."

"I don't follow you, John."

"It's this way. All of the physicists of the past made a mistake by using time as a dimension. Time really is more of a qualifying property of all of the dimensions. Einstein recognized this when he proposed that time would seem to stand still to a person traveling at the speed of light. To a person not moving at all, each second would represent infinity."

"**T**HEN our own perception of time is dependent on our spatial speed?"

"Exactly. I was on the verge of making my discoveries public when the epidemic struck. I had spent a good deal of time in research determining the exact speed we are traveling in space. I determined the speed of the earth on its axis, the speed of the earth on its orbit around the sun. The speed of the sun and its attendant planets on its orbit in the galaxy, and the speed of the galaxy through the infinity of space. There are times when some of these movements cancel and other times when they augment each other. It amounts to a difficult problem in differential calculus, but once we have learned these speeds it isn't difficult to figure our absolute velocity at any given time in the galactic year—which is about two million of our own years."

"But after you know the speed, what then? You don't propose to halt all motion and to make time infinite, do you? You can't stop the rush of stars through space, nor the planets on their trip around the sun!"

"No, but I can cushion the recoil of velocity! You know the action of certain drugs in doing away with the sense of time. This, of course, is illusory, but it can actually be done in a magnetized chamber which whirls on an axis and revolves in a figure 8 fashion on a track, which I have con-

structed in my laboratory. The movement of the magnetized chamber counteracts the spatial speeds of the earth, the sun and the stars, so that the body may rest in a state that is almost motionless. The deceleration is tremendous, but in ten hours I might bring about a condition where one minute would seem to be one hundred years. Of course, since this period is purely relative, my body would not age correspondingly. I have not attempted to do this yet, but I have checked the theoretical results and I am confident of the actual performance. If I can gain one hundred years in one minute before my death, I am confident that I can work out a cure for the disease!"

Roger Dailey nodded. "If it only works!"

"It has to work! It's bound to."

"Is your machine ready to start?"

"It will be ready in ten minutes."

"Are you able to undertake the task?"

"As able as I'll ever be."

Roger threw open the door to the laboratory. In the center of the room, on a small figure 8 track was a spherical car. It was large enough for a man.

A moment later both men were transferring notebooks and books from the laboratory desk to the machine.

"Are you ready, John?" asked Roger.

The giant, pale faced and shaking, nodded grimly.

Then the telephone rang.

"I'll answer," said Roger. He lifted the receiver. "Yes? Oh yes, George. The letter? Oh, I'd almost forgotten. From John Bellamy, you say? But he said nothing to me about it—oh! Read it!"

There was a long pause.

"George! George! What is the matter?"

Roger turned from the telephone to his fellow scientist.

"It's George, the butler. He was reading me the letter you wrote."

"I wrote you no letter."

"But you did! It has the secret of The Disease! It says you solved it in your time-chamber!"

"How did I solve it, when I've never used my time-chamber?"

"But you must have. You've forgotten. The Disease made you forget! You must have tried the chamber before!"

"If I'd discovered the cure for The Disease, I'd remember it. What is it?"

"George was just about to read that part of the letter when The Disease got him! He's on the floor at home with the letter in his hand. I've got to get that letter, John. It might save your life, and George's!"

Roger Dailey dashed from the room. The clock in the hallway showed 1.35 p. m. In eight hours John Bellamy would be dead, if the disease ran its course.

JOHAN BELLAMY stood beside his time machine, uncertain what to do. He was positive he had never written that letter. He was likewise positive that he was not suffering from amnesia. That wasn't a symptom of The Disease. The letter was a forgery. A hoax.

Time was fleeting. Life was growing shorter each tick of the clock. Bellamy had to get that time-chamber started if he was to complete the experiment before death arrived. Something might delay the starting or the stopping of the machine. There wasn't time to wait for Dailey's return, but everything depended on a start right now.

Bellamy stepped into the machine. He closed the door and reached toward the switch. Then the laboratory door swung open and a figure dashed into the room.

A voice cried: "Wait!"

But Bellamy already had touched the switch. With a breath-taking jerk, the chamber accelerated on the figure 8 track. The figure, standing beside the machine, seemed to fade away and disappear. The objects of the room blurred and Bellamy was conscious only of the interior of the chamber.

At first the acceleration caused discomfort, but gradually Bellamy's body became accustomed to the increasing speed. No longer was he aware of the change of speed, but as he pulled out his watch he saw that the second hand was moving with alarming slowness. A low-pitched whine came from the watch mechanism and he realized that this was a tick, no longer a single brief sound, but a long, drawn-out rattle.

John immediately set about working on his notes. He sketched the graph he had started at Dr. Dailey's home. There was something familiar about the figure. He studied it for what seemed to be hours, although the single tick of his watch had not ceased.

Suddenly he knew. The graph represented those used by electrical companies registering consumer demand for power during the twenty-four hours. The peak came in daytime, when industrial users drew electricity in the largest quantity. There was a slump in late afternoon as offices and stores closed and many shops shut down for the night. There was a slight rise in the early night as lights began to burn. Between midnight and dawn the power demand

was at low ebb. On cold and dark days, when electricity was used for heating and to burn extra lights, the graph would show higher peaks.

The Disease was caused by electricity!

But electricity had been used for many years before The Disease made its appearance. It must be something in the electric wires that carried the current. The wires now were made of a new copper alloy, offering less resistance to current than the old type wires. If these wires should become ever so radio-active by the electric current the cause of the disease might be sub-atomic, therefore invisible to the most powerful microscopes.

Radioactivity can cause cancer. X-rays can cause mutations in species. The effect of sub-atomic particles on living organisms has only been partly explored. A disease caused by electrons and protons and neutrons was logical and it fitted!

John Bellamy checked over records of observations made upon rats who had acquired the disease.

There was nothing to disprove the theory. In Bellamy's own case he had worked night after night under artificial lights trying to discover the cause of The Disease. The so-called plague districts of the city were located in neighborhoods of power-plants. Everything fitted!

Time was standing still. Even the watch had ceased ticking. Although Bellamy no longer felt the crush of acceleration, he was conscious of motion about him. But it was not the motion of the time chamber. The movement was in the walls themselves. Even the wires which carried the current to the lights in the chamber seemed to writhe.

Could it be the swift movement of

molecules? The movement was too fast to be observed in the ordinary march of time, but now that time no longer existed the wires were not wires at all, but writhing, vaporous strands. From time to time a tiny flaming pinpoint of vapor seemed to leap from the wires. Radioactivity! This was the final proof for Bellamy's theory. Everything in the chamber was spitting radioactive particles. No wonder life processes were interrupted.

"This is enough!" John Bellamy said. He shut off the switch and the chamber slowed. Death would come, but The Disease would be conquered long before death arrived.

There was a sickening deceleration that seemed to last a month, but at last John Bellamy opened the door of his chamber and stepped out into his laboratory. His watch had stopped, but the clock on the wall showed that it was 2 o'clock. Seven and one-half hours of life!

Where was the man who had entered the chamber a few minutes before? He had gone, doubtless his business was not so urgent, but Bellamy wondered who it could have been. There was something familiar about him. It might have been Dr. Dailey or a friend to tell him Dailey had been stricken.

Bellamy waited. Dailey did not appear. One hour passed. Two hours. Three. Four. Five. Only an hour and a half of life was left. It was best that the discovery be written down, in case Dailey failed to arrive.

Bellamy sat at his desk. He found paper and searched his pockets for a pencil. He found the pen Dailey had given him earlier in the day. When The Disease struck, Bellamy must have thrust it unconsciously into his pocket.

WHEN Bellamy finished writing, he had only forty-nine minutes of life left. The Disease would never fail to strike with clock-like precision. There would be no reprieve.

Bellamy's hands were cold. Death already was on its way. He told himself he wasn't afraid; that he could die like a man. But he was trembling. He shook himself. There was no escape. Trembling wouldn't help.

He tried to call Dailey on the telephone, but the operator refused to answer. Telephone service was terrible nowadays. There was no time to wait. Impatiently he slammed the receiver back on the hook and searched his desk for an envelope and stamp. He addressed the letter to Dr. Roger Dailey on Yprus Avenue. Then he stepped into the hall and walked weakly toward the mail chute.

Bellamy looked at his watch. There were twenty-seven minutes left. He ought to be in a coma, but he wasn't. Was there a slip-up? The last stage of the Disease should be making itself felt. But Bellamy was still in full possession of his faculties. Maybe he had won!

Bellamy hurried back to his apartment. He thought he heard footsteps behind him. It might be death! He turned. It wasn't death, nor Dailey, but a large, awkward looking man. The face wasn't very clear, but the figure was familiar, like that of the man who had tried to stop him from entering the time-chamber.

Bellamy suddenly was afraid of the man. He opened the door to his apartment and entered. Another man was in the room, standing by the lab door.

"What are you doing here?" Bellamy demanded. The fellow didn't seem to hear, but he opened the door

and entered the laboratory, slamming the door shut behind him.

John followed.

"What are you doing here?" came a cry.

Bellamy knew who spoke. The voice was his own, an echo, but an echo uttered by that man behind him. Bellamy fled into the laboratory. The man ahead was himself, climbing into the time machine.

"Wait!" cried Bellamy. The door of the machine closed.

Bellamy was ahead, behind, in the machine, leaving the mail chute, endlessly repeating his actions. There were twenty-seven minutes of life left. Would they ever pass?

The clock had not moved. Suddenly Bellamy realized he had more time than any man had ever possessed. It was not twenty-seven minutes, but twenty-four hours and twenty-seven minutes—a veritable eternity, when time stood still. For Bellamy had slowed down his body processes, and he had failed to accelerate them again. He had done more than that, he had sent himself backward in time twenty-three and one-half hours. The clock in the laboratory made him think he had been in the time machine thirty minutes, while he really left the machine twenty-three and one-half hours before he entered it. The letter he wrote Dailey would arrive before it was mailed.

The mistake had been a natural one. Bellamy had taken it for granted that the earth always traveled the same speed around the sun, while it does not. A small error had magnified itself many times. Bellamy had to make up the time he had gained in a whirlpool of time.

There was a thunderous buzz from the clock. A second had passed. One second in eternity. There were 84,519 more to go.



THE TOPAZ GATE

by JAMES BLISH

(Author of "Weapon Out of Time," "Phoenix Planet," etc.)

Had the usurper, Lan, doomed all of Mars through his mad alliance with the Metals, the strange beings that swarmed through the topaz gate? Toro Rotal and Torine Sela, ousted from their rightful places by the power-mad ex-plumber, knew they must strike soon, for more than the well-loved monarchy was at stake!

FOR TERRESTRIAL readers the following account perhaps needs some word of explanation. Mars as we know it today is dead, and because by our standards there are almost no weathering effects there, the ruined cities which we have found are of an inestimable age. Exactly how old, we have no way of telling. It is certain that the chronicle of the Toro Rotal relates to events which happened thousands of years before Greece; we have yet to find how many thousands. Probell sets the date at 6000 B. C., which is a guess, yet a guess which might as well be true as any other.

The chronicles themselves were found in the ruins in the Mare Icarium, by far the most well-preserved of all the Martian cities, the same one which history says Gregory Marshall explored in the twentieth century. They take the form of a tightly rolled fascicle of very brittle parchment, made from the skin of the animal which the Toro Rotal refers to as the phairsillio. The characters are of a form unknown on most other parts of Mars (which discrepancy the narrative explains) and are in a reddish ink, very faded by time. Since the discovery of this document in the crumbling walls of the city (Tasil,

the Toro Rotal calls it) ten years have passed, and until two years ago we had no clue as to the meaning of the red writing. Thanks to the finding of the Abila Grammar, however, we are now able to offer this story of old Mars to the Terrestrial public.

The story is so significantly parallel to Earthly history, and so marvelously divergent into fields of science as yet unexplored by us, that the present editor has attempted to encumber the popular translation with as few footnotes as possible. Certain terms relating to Martian geography have been changed to their more familiar equivalents; names of parts of the body, insects, etc., have also been reduced as far as possible; beyond that there has been no alteration. Where the story is incomplete (as it is at several points and indeed at the very beginning) we have relied upon the readers' imagination rather than our own to fill in the gaps.

Prof. Dr. August Sonnenblick
Stel. Anthro. Collegium Nurn-
burgensis 1988 A. D.

RICKETY, but I was certainly in no position to be discriminating about hiding places. I started for the stairs, hoping to find a storeroom where I could conceal my-

A COMPLETE NOVELET

self, but the stairs broke off about a third of the way up and dropped into the empty air. I was almost exhausted, and wheeled desperately into the forward room to crouch into the near front corner by the doorway.

There was no sound of pursuit, but then, the Metals were soundless. All I could hear was my own heavy breathing. Truly, my scientists must be right; the air of this world was thinner already than that for which evolution had adapted us. I, the Toro, ruler of all Nu, who had fought in the fields of New Year's Eve four times, to be so easily winded!

I snatched furtively at a fly that buzzed around my head and strained my ears. Indeed, the Toro Rotal was not in a pretty situation. Cowering in the corner of a deserted house, without a countryman in all Tasil, pursued by the Tasilians and the Metals alike—and dogged in hiding by flies! There did seem to be a lot of them, too many for one place at this season. I glanced over my shoulder and saw why.

The roof of the house had been smashed away by a force-beam, and in crumbling had taken with it the rear. The back room had served as a dining room, and there had been three people in it when the beam struck. By some curious quirk of coincidence, the table had not been disturbed at all; the force had apparently glanced from some metal fixture in a hollow cone, so that all around the table there was chaos, and on the table the plates and utensils lay neatly. That little ricochet had caught the three diners, and the crushing force had dealt with them as with the house, and the flies buzzed around them . . .

Well, it was a better death than that which some call the Plague. The

Metals had dealt rather roughly with their allies before they had turned on Nu.

There was a splintering crash from the hall, a flash of green lightning, and another concussion from the rear of the house*. I raised my tube, with its one pitiful charge, and waited.

In a moment one of the little soldiers of the Metals appeared just inside the room. It didn't seem to see me, and I had a moment to study it. I had never seen any of the Metals close to, events having transpired the way they did, and this one was a queer sight.

They were small, those soldiers; about twice the length of a hand, and in the shape of three cones, the first two base to base, the second and third tip to tip. The pointed end was hollow and projected the force-ray; the flat end was the rear. The whole was connected by little rods and curved metal pieces, giving an intricate, filagreed, delicate effect which was enhanced by the complete absence of any sort of joint or connection. It was all one entity. No robot, this; a living creature, evolved by nature, even as we had been evolved, and different only in that it was smooth metal instead of flesh.

For an instant it floated there, motionless, yet sentient, looking for me in an enigmatic eyeless way. Then it swung toward me in an inexpressibly graceful motion and the green lightning flared from the tip of the cone. Bricks and plaster pounded

*The "force beam" is apparently very similar to Martin's neutronic inductor, which also throws a green beam and reflects from metal surfaces. How any organism, even a metal one, could pack within its body the apparatus with which Martin filled Tycho Crater, is still a mystery to Terrestrial science.—A. S.

my back. At the same moment my own tube flashed, and the exquisite, deadly thing dissolved into a whirl of dust.

I CROUCHED, listening, but no more came. Safe, for a little while; but now I was indeed unarmed. I knew that somewhere in Tasil the faithful Captain Enarto waited at a rendezvous for which I was long overdue. But how was I to get there with all of the Toro Lan's city-state on the watch for me, and the deadly Metals and their soldiers constantly prowling, sleepless, tireless, armed with the Plague and the deadly force-ray?

I ran the whole thing over in my mind, trying to order my confused thoughts. First, there was the Toro Lan himself. Thinking of him, I could no longer wonder why Tasil and Nu were at war. The blood in my veins was old, as indeed everything is upon old Mars. I was the heir of a line of royalty that ran back into prehistory. Men bearing the name of Rotal had been Toros of Nu since the days of the canal-builders. Tasil, too, had been a monarchist city for thousands of years—until the coming of this upstart Lan and his crackpot ideas about syndicalism. The days when the mob ruled Mars were gone, we had thought—old Mars, with its ancient wisdom, had advanced to a point where a benevolent monarchy was possible, and syndicalism with its confusion and inefficiency, had passed into history.

But it apparently had not, for Lan had urged the people of Tasil to revolution, snatched the Torine Sela from her throne, and announced himself Toro of Tasil "by the will of the people."

I thought of lovely Sela, and my rage against the Toro Lan, great

enough on other causes, came to a boil. We were to have been married, for her family and mine had linked the destinies of the two city-states of Tasil and Nu in the strongest alliance on Mars. What had this plumber-upstart done with her?

But the alliance of Tasil and Nu was at an end. Lan, like all upstart rulers, had let his power go to his head. From some crypt of space, no one but Lan himself knew where, the terrible inhuman Metals had come, and after raging through the city for three days, had allied for their own enigmatic purposes with Lan; and Tasil and the Metals together were conquering Mars.

I peered cautiously around the door. Down the street, a good distance away, I saw the globular form of a Metal ruler, neck-like cone and dependent tentacles swaying beneath it as it floated. I could dimly make out the knobs on those wiry tentacles, and knew that, close up, those knobs were little spiked rosettes of metal, spaced evenly along the length of the twining arms. It was from those rosettes that, upon contact, the people of Mars became affected with what was called the Plague. Real disease on Mars had been wiped out thousands of years ago, but the poison from those barbs produced an effect very like the ancient Black Mold—not a pleasant way to die. I, for one, preferred the green force-ray. It was a cleaner death.

But the Metal was distant, and moving away from me. I could risk a dash. I waited a few more minutes, until it disappeared around a corner and the street was clear; then I vaulted down the steps and bounded along the pavement.

I had but one thought in mind: to get to the little by-way near Potra Polygon, and meet Captain Enar-

to. It was my only hope of escape. Enarto and his tiny flyer were well hidden in the dwelling of some people he knew who were still faithful to the Toriue Sela, and he would wait for me until I came, or until he had news of my safety, or until he died. Such are the men Nu breeds. I did not bother to wonder about his waiting. I knew it, and thought nothing of it. I could have commanded the total population of Nu to walk into the deadly area of Criminal Chamber, and nobody would have hung back.

I snatched a glance over my shoulder, and my heart nearly stopped. The Metal had come back, and had seen me! The deadly shining globe bowled purposefully after me, tentacles whipping. I have some reputation as a runner—every Toro worthy of the name must be a good athlete—but I saw quickly that I was no match for the Metal in speed. In a few moments it would catch me, and if it did, and I got so much as a scratch from one of those little barbs—

I ducked hastily into a little dark side street, and ran into somebody. Without looking, I tried to brush past, but strong arms grabbed me, and I felt a ray-tube pressed into my kidneys. "Got him," a terse voice grunted in the Tasilian tongue. Before I could catch my breath or even see who my captors were, I was hustled into complete darkness, and heard a door slam behind me.

"**I**S THE Metal gone, Calo?" the same voice asked, and another, a younger one, answered in low tones, "It went on by."

A dim light snapped on overhead. My captors were three men in the uniform of the Toro Lan's private guard, all carrying ray-tubes and

alert for the slightest move on my part. For a moment I thought it might have been better to have been caught by the Metal, but then I changed my mind. The Toro Lan of Tasil was my deadliest enemy; yet for all my scorn of him, I knew he was infernally clever—too clever to lose a magnificent advantage over Nu by harming me. No, the Toro of Nu was an excellent hostage, too valuable to harm—and opportunities for escape might present themselves at any time.

A nudge from the ray-tube of the guard called Calo brought me out of my thoughts. "Move along, Toro Rotal," he sneered contemptuously, and propelled me down a narrow passage with rough shoves. I dug my heels into the stone, shook myself loose, and stared coldly at him.

"I'll go where I am taken," I told him. "In the meantime, I'll thank you to remember the name you misused, and put the accent in the proper place. The Toro Rotal."

He wilted, as I knew he would. "Sorry," he muttered. "Hard to remember proper courtesy after escaping a Metal so narrowly."

"Close your mouth," snapped the older guard, as if enraged, but it was too late—the slip was out. So the Toro Lan's own men were afraid of the Metals! Their alliance with Tasil was none too strong, apparently; it seemed that Lan was having difficulties in keeping them under control. I stored this bit of information away with the other things I had learned in the city. It might come in handy.

The passage wound on interminably. By now I was sure that it ran underground, probably direct to the palace itself. I wondered if Captain Enarto knew about it; if so, he might be able to follow it in after

me, once he had news of my capture. It might be, of course, that the Toro Lan would keep it secret to the city; but if my knowledge of Tasilian psychology was any good, he wouldn't. These northerners are easily goaded to fight, but they lose heart quickly at set-backs; the knowledge that the Toro of Nu was captured, with its promise of a quick ending to the war and quick riddance of the dangerous Metal allies, would be just the thing to put more fight into them. Then, when Enarto heard the news—

I was shortly forced to drop this idea. Almost inconspicuous, cleverly concealed in the walls just over my head, were small ports, and behind them I caught the unmistakable shimmering gleam of force lenses which marked the placing of ray-tubes. These ports were set in the walls about every fifty feet along the way. No, even if Enarto did know of this passage, or found it by accident, he would not get much past the entrance before he would be blasted into fine dust.

We turned down a smaller side-branch, and I marked it carefully. At all costs I must preserve my orientation, in case of a possible escape. At the end of the passage was a little elevator, in which we shot aloft. Ten clicks of the floor meter, and the door rolled open again upon a little ante-room. Here the older guard put a call in on a visiset. His body blocked the plate, but I could pretty well guess whose face was limned upon it.

"We got him, Highness," the guard reported. The speaker muttered inaudibly. Then, after a moment, "Yes, Highness, immediately." The contact was broken, and we reentered the elevator. Again I

counted the clicks—one-two-three-four-five-six stories.

WHEN THE door opened I saw, far across a polished floor of black stone, the throne of the Torine Sela, in all the jeweled magnificence which makes it still one of the wonders of Mars. Sitting on it, too, enveloped and almost lost in Sela's scarlet cloak of authority, was the nondescript figure of the self-styled Toro Lan, and at the sight my anger began to rise again. So this was the way the experiment in "syndicalism" had worked out! Lan, the "people's ruler," had lost no time in taking unto himself the regalia of monarchy!

He rose as we approached, smiling sardonically. "The Toro Rotal, is it not?" he said. "Welcome to my poor lodgings."

I bowed stiffly. "I accept the welcome, in the name of the Torine Sela."

His brow knotted, and his eyes narrowed with anger. He was too small to be impressive when angry, and I almost laughed in his face, but remembered in time that this man was as dangerous as he was undistinguished-looking. "Torine no longer!" he spat. Then, more calmly, "By the people's will, my dear Rotal, I am Toro of Tasil, and soon of Nu as well—Tasil, then Nu, then Abila, then Ged—then, Mars!"

"The people of Mars may object more strongly than those of Tasil."

He chuckled. "Especially with the strong alliance you have arranged between Nu and Abila opposing me, eh? But after I send the news of your capture I think the people of Nu will be delighted to fight—against Abila!"

"I would hardly call that an invincible combination," I said drily,

ignoring the blow to my peace-time plans of state given by this devilish plan. "With Nu weakened by the rabble of your armies, most of them fighting at your command to protect Sela rather than to advance you—well, Ged and Abila and the others have my vote of confidence."

This didn't annoy him nearly as much as I had thought it would. He chuckled again, and there was something sinister in his glee. He arose and, coming down the steps of the throne, led me behind it to a small door. "It is the wrong time," he said, half to himself, "but I think perhaps the demonstration will be convincing enough—" While I was puzzling over what these remarks could mean, the door's combination-lock opened under his touch, and he bowed mockingly to me, indicating that I should enter. As I did so, he closed and relocked the door.

"Rather dangerous procedure, not so, Lan?" I remarked. "It would be easy for me to overpower you here, away from your guards."

"Did I not know that your superiority over me in physical strength was matched by your royal but foolish horror of using it so," he replied, still smiling craftily. "There are always these," and he waved a negligent hand at the walls of the room. Just beneath the coping I could see the ever-present ports for the ray-tubes of the guard. I wondered when those holes had been made. Certainly no rightful king of Mars had ever required such heavy guarding. I looked at the room.

It was fairly large; about half the size of the throne-room, I should judge. In its center was a strange structure. Supported in a delicate, almost invisible framework of fine wires was a monstrous gem, an amber, many-faceted, gorgeous thing

like a topaz from the finger-ring of a god. It glistened and flashed ceaselessly under the lights of the room. I wondered where on Mars he had gotten such a jewel.

"It is synthetic," he said, interpreting my glance correctly. "One of the triumphs of ex-Torine Sela's physicists."

"If Sela's men made it, I can be sure you're misusing it," I commented shortly.

"From Sela's standpoint, perhaps yes."

I glared at him. "Plumbers refer to her as the Torine, not by name."

"Very well, then," he said indifferently. "It amuses me occasionally to take orders from my high-and-mighty prisoners. The Torine it shall be."

MY HEART leaped, although I kept my face straight. There was more than one royal prisoner—then Sela was somewhere within the palace! His voice brought me back.

"This device we call the Gate," he said. "Gates lead somewhere, and this one is no exception. This one leads into—the fourth dimension."

I laughed.

"Laugh if you like. I am about to show you, and then afterwards—laugh if you can." He pulled a switch, and from somewhere below a generator responded, an atomic generator of tremendous capacity, if the tone of the hum was any criterion. In a moment it died slightly, then remained constant just within audibility. I could feel its song of power through the floor.

Another switch clicked under Lan's fingers, and from the wall above my head a thin beam of pure white light lanced out, striking the crystal squarely in the center. Opposite, on the other wall, a similar beam appeared, so that the gem seemed to

be pierced through by a white-hot wire. From the walls at right angles two more beams appeared, so that the illusory wires crossed. No—not crossed, for they disappeared at the surface of the crystal. Another click, and a fifth beam lanced from the ceiling and splashed upon the gleaming gem, and I sensed, rather than saw, that a sixth in the same line had sprung into being. Six beams of light, all impinging on the crystal at right angles to each other—what did it mean?

The room was silent . . . silent except for that soft, echoing hum, that filled it like the whispering of the wash of the receding tide. Steadily, unwinkingly, the six rays played upon the many-faceted topaz, seeming slowly to stir an amber fire within the cool depths. Strange images came and went before my eyes, but they were only images of myself and Lan, queerly multiplied and distorted. . . .

Again a switch went down, and the white rays began to change color, assuming the unmistakable green radiance of the force-beam! What—

"The substance of the gem," said Lan, his voice strangely subdued and, I think now, a little awed, "is incompressible and indestructible. It is pure neutronium, rendered transparent by the same field of energy which supports its tremendous weight. This energy flows in the wires you saw, and makes it possible to observe the stresses within the gem, and prevents it from falling to the center of the planet."

"Why the force-rays?" I asked. "They are arranged to compress the gem from all sides—and as you say, neutronium is incompressible. What then?"

"It is incompressible," said Lan, "but the force-beam cannot be com-

pletely nullified by anything but another force-beam. In other words, what happens is that an irresistible force—the ray—has met an immovable object—the gem."

"Well?"

"The rays compress the gem in three dimensions, as you see. But being incompressible, it cannot move in three dimensions. It must, nevertheless, move. So it moves into four dimensions."

I began to see the implications of the mechanism. I turned back to the gem. Swiftly the unwavering beams had begun to take effect, and a glowing aura had flowed from the jewel, spread to encompass me, the Toro Lan, the whole room. . . . Amber rainbows played back in flowing lines of monochromatic light that were at the same time a symphony in nameless radiances. . . .

Suddenly, queerly, the great topaz began to melt away. I cannot describe the effect. It was as if the whole thing were being extruded, somehow, into an alien space beyond comprehension. In a moment it was gone altogether, and the three green beams played upon an area of amber nothingness, bright, misty . . . there was nothing to be seen except—

"They come," said Lan, softly, and I could not resist a shudder at his tone. "They come . . . from the depths of space, so that I, the Toro Lan, may be ruler of Mars . . ."

Deep within the bright misty space a tiny dot was visible. It was almost too small to be seen, yet it did not give the impression of a small size. It was a distance effect. It was as if it were something large but many miles away. It hovered in the middle of the amber glow, and began to swell, as if rushing toward us at incredible speed. Soon it was

the size of my head, and with a shock of horror I saw it for what it was.

A Metal!

A Metal ruler, tentacles writhing, growing in the topaz flames, drawn by Lan's mad ambition from another space!

So this was where they came from! I might have guessed—nothing so alien as life fashioned from metal could evolve in this universe. They came from a space incredibly hidden, incredibly different, farther from man and his kind than the farthest galaxy.

"Turn it off," I said. "Turn it off before the thing gets here and attacks us."

"I am their master," said the Toro Lan. I remembered the soldier's chance remark and wondered . . .

(At this point there is a gap in the manuscript.—A. S.)

ON MY way down to my cell I wondered how much longer he would be able to control his monstrous allies. He was mad, this little rabble-rousing plumber, to release such a deadly horde upon his own planet, chancing that he too would fall in the chaos which would inevitably result. And now I had been captured, and was soon to become an unwilling cog in the machine of his ambition!

I was a glum monarch as the cell door clanged behind me. Well, at least he had enough respect for me to put me in a fairly comfortable place. I ran my eyes over it, looking for possible avenues of escape. None. No—wait—a small hole in the wall there—

I waited until the footsteps of the guard had retreated down the corridor and faded away, then hastened

over to the wall. It was a very small hole, piercing one side of the hollow brick of which this part of the palace had been built. I slipped off my belt and scraped at the edges with the ornate copper buckle until the opening was larger than my fist. Now if I could break through the other wall of the brick and see what was next to my cell—

The hope that I would find anything to allow my escape was a forlorn one, but I had to do something to keep my mind off the dreadful doom which was so soon to come upon my beautiful city of Nu and perhaps all Mars. I listened intently for sounds of the guard, and, hearing none, stuck the belt-buckle in the hole and gave it a sharp blow with the heel of my shoe. The sound, in the silence of the cell-block, seemed thunderous to my straining ears. I put the shoe back on my foot and listened.

"Who's there?"

A voice, a mere whisper, coming from the very air! I searched frantically for its source; it had seemed to come from the wall on which I was working. I put my ear to the hole, and in a moment the question was repeated, quite clearly, this time in the Nuvian dialect. The hollow bricks obviously, were acting as a voice tube to a break in another cell-wall!

"Who's there?" the voice whispered a third time, this time in Gedian.

"The Toro Rotal," I replied as softly, returning to the Tasilian tongue in which the question had first been uttered.

"Rotal! So he has you, too! Where are you?"

"Who are you?" The voice seemed very familiar, but the improvised

stone communication-tube distorted it a good deal.

"Sela."

"Darling! Thank heavens! I had hoped you were in the palace somewhere. I'm in the second cell on the first block. I was trying to pound a hole through the wall on my right."

"I heard you. That'll do you no good. The empty cells are all kept locked. Mine is number one on the second block, so it's back to back with the one you were trying to break into."

I was silent for a moment. It was wonderful to hear her voice and know she was near and still alive, yet I could not see how it would benefit us.

"Sela! Can we get out of this place, do you think?"

"I have a ray-tube I managed to hide before they threw me in here, but some traitress among my maids had taken the fuel-core out of it. Have you any copper about you?"

"A belt-buckle. But how can I get it to you?"

"Pound it out with whatever you were using on the wall—"

"Hmm," I said, beginning to hope. "The guard?"

"Won't be back for another half hour, and the audiophones won't pick up sounds inside the cells."

I hesitated for a moment, then snatched off my shoe. After all, Sela ought to know. It was her prison.

I WINCED at the noise the first blow made, but pounded on determinedly. The massive ornamental buckle was stubborn. As I worked a plan crept gradually into my head. In another week New Year's Eve would be here — the night of the great games in which all the people of Mars took part. Often the Toros

of the cities also tried their strengths. It was doubtful that Lan would call off the festival, even for his war, for it happened only once every cycle* and was the greatest holiday of the planet. And if I could do something to turn the assembled people of Tasil from the despotism of Lan on that night—

I had the copper buckle pounded out into a rough bar, and devoted myself to knocking a larger hole in the wall.

"Sela?"

"Here, darling."

"Put your hand in the opening. I'm going to whack the bar down to you hard with my shoe and you'll have to catch it. All right?"

"Let it come," her voice came muffledly.

I hit the bar hard and heard it rattle down the uneven tube. There was a small cry of disappointment from Sela. "It's stuck. Can you hit it again, somehow?"

I thought furiously. Ah! Prying off the soft plastic heel of my shoe, I scraped a notch into it on the edge of the stone door-jamb, and after five minutes of straining had it torn into two nearly equal parts. I laid one of these in the breach of our stone gun, called a warning, and gave it a crack with my other shoe.

"That knocked it down quite a bit. Do it again, can you?"

I repeated the process with the other half of the heel.

"That—does it, I think. I can just touch it—there!"

For a moment there was silence.

"Rotal?"

"Here."

"Stand to the left."

I crowded myself into the left rear corner, and in a moment the right

*Four years earth time.—A. S.

side of the wall melted into dust and Sela stepped through. I gathered her tall, slender body into my arms.

"We're doing beautifully so far," she commented after a few minutes, adjusting her hair. "See?" She held up her ray-tube. The improvised core didn't fit too well, but it served the purpose.

"Let's get out, then; melt the door."

She shook her blonde head. "We'd have to fight the guards. We'll go out through the floor. The tunnels for the supply trains go under here." The ray flashed again, and I dropped through the hole and caught Sela as she followed me. The soft warmth of her was almost irresistible, but we had no time for love-making now.

"This way." She set out down the tracks.

"Better conserve the ray charges—that buckle is pure copper, and it'll burn rapidly."

"Have you any plan?"

"Yes. We'll hide with one of my men here, Captain Enarto, until New Year's Eve—"

"And then?"

"I'm going to challenge the self-elected Toro Lan in the games!"

CAPTAIN Enarto's little speedster hung high in the cold, thin night air over the outskirts of Tasil. Far below Sela and I could see the great Potron Stadium, a tiny bright circle outlined in lights against the blackness of the countryside.

"Drop a little lower, Captain."

The hum of the gravity plates faded a little, and the speedster dropped silently. The diamond circle began to swell until we could make out the royal box, occupying a full sixth of the space on the north side, back to the wind which blows eternally southward over Mars.

"Far enough. What's going on, Sela? Is Lan there?"

"No—yes, I can see him now," she replied, moving the eyepiece of the visoscope a little. "How funny he looks in my robe!"

"Shall I send up the sun-shell, majesties?"

"Not yet, Captain," Sela said. "There's still something going on on the field. Some kind of a race."

We sat tensely, waiting.

"The race is over! Now, captain!"

The faithful officer tripped the toggle, and a rocket arched above us and burst into a hundred brilliant little suns. Ten thousand faces turned toward us, limned whitely in the fierce actinic light, and skillfully Enarto dropped the speedster into the very center of the stadium.

When we emerged there was an instant's dead silence; then a mutter that rolled onward and upward inexorably to a great, multifarious shouting.

"Sela! Sela! Rotal!"

And with that: "Tasil! Tasil! Nu!"

I raised my hand. I must act quickly, for I could see Lan's guards moving cautiously out from all sides, and we could not judge how many of them would remember older allegiances. There was an immediate hush.

"Citizens of Tasil, and guests of the city!" I cried, and the amplifiers picked up my voice and thundered it to the farthest reaches of the stadium. "In accordance with ancient custom, and by the right of New Year's Eve, I challenge the Toro Lan to the Nigono—a combat with bare hands, to the death!"

There was a moment's stunned silence, and I held my breath. Then pandemonium broke loose.

"Nigono! Nigono! Nigono!"

I had judged rightly. The appearance of the Torine Sela had primed

them, and the challenge to Nigono, issued for the first time since the War of the Kings a hundred years ago had caught their imaginations. Lan did not dare refuse; and if I defeated him, Sela would be back on the throne, and the threat of the Metals would be ended forever.

If . . . I was sure I could win under ordinary conditions, but certainly, despite the strict age-old rules, the contest would be fixed in his favor in some way. I could see him now, ridiculous in the out-size scarlet cloak, whispering over his shoulder to an officer, his shrewd little eyes never leaving me. His guards, too, were all around. No, the fight was not yet won, by any means.

We moved to the edge of the field as a warning note rang out. Enarto had unobtrusively taken off again, but I knew that his speedster was hanging watchfully overhead, just out of sight. The sod in the center was lifting away to expose the great metal disc on which the Nigono, by tradition, must be fought. It was green with disuse, but workers were already swarming over it with polishing cloths and sand.

The musicians in the west stands blew a weird quarter-tone call—one which had not been sounded in a century. Then the speakers belled: "The Toro Lan of Tasil and the Toro Rotal of Nu—stand forth!"

First breach—the name of the visiting monarch should come first. But what could you expect?

LAN came down from his throne. I was more than a little nervous. We stripped and faced each other across the great disc, and I could see that this would be no easy battle, even if it were fair. He was small, but stocky, with bunched mus-

cles. I preferred the whipcord type, and had developed them in myself, but I knew those bulges packed power.

The call blared again; there was a moment's tense silence—

"Nigono!"

He lowered his head and came at me like an infuriated phairisilio, and we locked on my side of the disc. For a moment we stood thus, straining, glaring at each other. Then, snapping his left arm suddenly around in back of him, I broke and jerked it hard with my left, sending him spinning away from me. The stands muttered.

Once more he closed in. Apparently that charge was his only attack. Poor plumber, he had had none of the careful training in physical combat given every Toro who is born to his job. This was going to be pitifully easy.

I shifted my position at the last minute to catch his shoulder and send him reeling off again, but as he struck me my foot slid on a patch of sand the workers had left, and I fell. The crowd roared and stood up. For an instant I was flat on the hard metal, and I felt an almost intolerable weight.

Then I was up again, and knowing only too well how the contest would be overbalanced in Lan's favor. While still underground, the plate had been wired for gravity! Somewhere in the stands there was a man with a control button, to energize the disc for an instant every time I fell, increasing my weight and winding me! Somehow, I had to stay on my feet, or drag Lan with me if I fell!

Enraged at this breach of decency and tradition alike, I sprang toward Lan. How could I defeat him without doing anything which would cause me to fall?

We circled each other cautiously. Acting on a crazy impulse, and contradicting all the pointers my old instructor had ever given me, I clenched my right hand into a balled fist and hit him in the face with it, as hard as I could. The crowd thundered, and the guards fingered ray-tubes nervously.

As for Lan, he staggered away, and I have never seen a man look more amazed. Quickly I followed up my advantage. Instinct made me choose my left fist this time, and luckily, for he blocked the blow. I crossed over with my right hand and hit him again. It was a pretty motion, and I remember thinking even in those tense minutes to tell my instructor about this new style of fighting when I got back.

These tactics were too much for Lan, and he rushed in at me. I managed to hit him once more before we locked—he made no attempt to guard himself against the blow—and then we were both down on the bare metal of the disc. His arms slipped under my shoulders and his hands locked over my throat. Frantically I twisted as I had been taught to break the grip, but those muscles were like steel, immovable, inexorable. I must fight fair — his men were watching for every foul—

I balled my hand again and hit him in the stomach with it. He gasped and broke away, struggling to his feet, and for a moment before I could follow I felt that terrible, crushing weight. I couldn't stand much more of that!

The tone of the shouting around us changed with ominous suddenness. I risked a glance at the packed rows of seats. In that unguarded second Lan crashed into me like a rocket—

but I had seen enough to understand the horror-struck, upturned faces—

The Metals!

THEY came by the hundreds, dropping silently from the night sky toward the terrified crowd. Suddenly on the north end a green bolt flashed—then another—the Metal soldiers had opened fire! Above them the globular rulers swayed downward more slowly, tentacles whipping with vicious significance. Someone in the crowd screamed piercingly. Sela?

Lan clawed his way free of me and ran across the field toward the throne, shouting hoarsely. Before I could move a Metal ruler plummeted down at him. He glanced over his shoulder, screamed once, and tripped; and as he fell, the Metal lashed one tentacle, almost contemptuously, it seemed, across his back. He lay where he had fallen, and from the punctures the barbs had made in his skin, little clouds of leprous blackness crept out . . .

Something struck the disc gratingly behind me. I whirled, resolved to die as a Toro should—but it was Enarto's speedster. He jumped out, a ray-tube in each hand; he hurled them both at me and drew two more from his belt.

"Sela!" I shouted above the din. "We've got to find her!"

He nodded imperturbably and fired over my head. Dust and metal filings showered down.

The speakers came to life. "The Metals are attacking all the North of Mars," they boomed desperately. "Tasilians—" Then they cut out again. Intermingled with the green flare of the force-ray I could see bursts from the tubes of the guards, but there were so few of them, and

almost nobody among the spectators was armed—

"Here comes the Torine, highness," Enarto shouted. He was standing with his back against the ship, feet apart, ray-tubes blasting almost continuously. As I remember his expression now, I think he must have been enjoying himself hugely. Sure enough, Sela was running frantically towards us, golden hair streaming. She still had her gun, but even as I saw her she fired one deadly burst into a darting Metal soldier and flung it away from her. Its charge was exhausted. Green beams crisscrossed and furrowed the earth behind her.

Enarto and I fired as rapidly as we could, and our tubes grew hot in our hands. It seemed to take her forever to reach the disc, but at last we were grasping her and swinging her through the port.

"Into the air, Captain," I gasped. "We can do more good from there."

As we shot aloft I could hear him sending out a radio call. In a moment the answer came.

"What's the trouble, Enarto? The ether's all gummed up all through the north."

"Metal attack," he said crisply. "The Toro is with me. Guess we're at peace with Tasil again. Contact Ged and Abila and get as many ships over here as you can, or all of Mars'll be overrun."

THAT is all there is to our part of the story. The Metals had relied too much on surprise; they had hoped to have Tasil wiped out before the other city-states got word of the assault. Once the combined air fleets of Mars had been warned, they didn't stand a chance.

Of course, Sela had the Topaz Gate destroyed. It was her first act after she was restored to the throne. The remaining Metals were hunted down ruthlessly and destroyed, and now none remain on Mars. From what strange metallic germs they evolved, what their civilization was like, what they wanted with Mars, we shall never know; but they are a menace that, if the gods are pleased, will never trouble our planet again.

Soon after we were married, Sela suggested that we supplement the account the historians made with our own inside view. I had a better idea. Our astronomers tell us there may be intelligent life on the blue star; perhaps they may visit Mars some day. They might find the story more interesting, for to our people it is still only too terribly familiar. Hence I have written the tale as it happened, with ink made from the red desert sands and on phairsilio parchment; and I will hide the completed manuscript in the hollow bricks of the palace prison in Tasil, where Sela and I were once held.

Greetings, men of Earth!

READ — The Spring Issue of
SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY

(144 Pages)

A Complete Novel by Ed Earl Repp

STATION X

The Ayes and Noes of Fandom

(You are invited to send your letters of comment upon FUTURE FICTION, and science fiction in general, for publication in this department, to FUTURE FICTION, 60 Hudson Street, New York City.)

Greetings, readers. This is your department, my department—our department, opening shop for another session of who knows what. First of all, we want to thank you for your response to our request for letters. Those letters you write do help us determining just what type of stories you like and what type do not please you—and they help us keep on our toes, too. Complimentary letters give us faith in our ability to hit the spot with you; letters which say "nerfs" keep us from getting too complacent and smug about it all. And it helps even more when you tell us why something either stunk or smelled pretty.

And now we'll introduce our authors for this issue of FUTURE FICTION. Starting off, we find a name which might not be completely familiar to all of you—Fritz Leiber, Jr. Mr. Leiber has written a number of fantastic stories which appeared during the past two years or so in a contemporary magazine completely devoted to the weird or fantastic aspect of imaginative fiction. This, so far as we know, will be his first appearance in print with a science fiction tale, and we're glad to have him. And, if you like this yarn, we have another one on hand which we think is quite neat.

Back in 1935, when science fiction magazines were so few that you had to look a long time before you found one, a story appeared in one of the leading titles of that day by a new writer named R. R. Winterbotham. A quiet, but somehow memorable little story it was, "The Star that Would not Behave". Then, a few months later, another tale called "The Psycho Power Conquest". From that date, we started watching for this Winterbotham follow. He's had around 80 stories published so far, and the way we feel about it, we're sorry if we've missed reading any of these 80. We hope you agree.

Jim Blish should be known to some of you as a fan of years ago. He was a member, a rather active one, of the old International Scientific Association, the club that started science-fiction conventions on a real scale. Well, lately, Jim has seen the error of his ways and taken to writing science fiction. His stories, for the most part, all fit into one historical pattern, and some day we're going to ask him for a chronology of them so they can be read in the correct order. Of course, they aren't a steady stream of solid future history, but they do, in their own way, give a picture of tomorrow as it might be.

Lawrence Woods usually doesn't write them as short as "A Million Years and a Day." But this idea took hold of him and here's the story. Incidentally, don't forget to

write your letter on the solution of the problem. Your editor can think up perfectly swell arguments for both sides of the case, but we must admit that we can't figure out which button she pushed—and, for that matter, Woods himself was anything but co-operative. Woods irks us at times. So we're putting it squarely up to you, readers. See page 82 for full details.

William Morrisson's a newcomer. He's an example of the fact that one does find new, good stories among the large amount of unsolicited ones we constantly receive. We won't say any more except to voice our personal hopes that "The Barbarians" doesn't represent a mere flash in the pan.

That brings us to "The Stone Men of Ignola", an odd little tale which we think you'll like. Most of you have heard of Victor Rousseau. One of the real oldtimers, who was writing fantastic novels and short stories long before there were any all-science fiction magazines. Let us know what you think of this yarn.

Leslie A. Crouch is a Canadian fan and writer. You fans have probably noticed letters by him in the various readers' departments for some years now. We remember him well. In "Salvage Job", it looks as though he were off to a good start. But we won't let him ride on laurels—that's one thing which we get tough about.

And, finally, we have Oliver Saari—another writer up from fandom. Saari's been appearing pretty regularly during the past year or so, and we shouldn't be surprised if we all see a lot more of him. If—there's always that if, and your letters have a lot to do with it.

The cover, this time, is by an artist you may have seen on the inside of some of our contemporary sf mags. John H. Forte is the gentleman's name, and we're very happy to have given him his first cover. Don't forget to vote on it when you write in.

Just a couple things more, then we'll sit down and let you talk. You'll be interested in knowing how the stories came out in the April issue. Here they are in the order in which you preferred them. "A Prince of Pluto", "30th Century Duel", "The Radiant Avenger", "Status Quo", "Martian Guns", and "The Genius Bureau". Station X was liked by everyone, and Futurian Times, we're happy to say, made a big hit. And how you cheered that cover! Excuse us while we strut a bit because we predicted you'd like it.

Okay, time's about up. We'll just mention then, that there are two sister magazines to FUTURE FICTION. Their titles are SCIENCE FICTION magazine, and SCIENCE FICTION QUARTERLY. The first mentioned appears every other month, while the

QUARTERLY's title is self-descriptive. Your local newsstands will have the current issues of both, and may we suggest that you seek them out now, before the supply is gone. Of course, you can always obtain them by sending 15 or 25 cents to this office, depending on whether you want SCIENCE FICTION magazine or the QUARTERLY, and we'll send them off to you pronto, but that is extra trouble, isn't it? You can avoid all that, and spare yourself the day or so you have to wait, by applying to your local dealer now. And when you write in to us, please address your letters to

ROBERT W. LOWNDES

Editor FUTURE FICTION
60 Hudson Street,
New York City

Graham Conway's letter has started a lively discussion on a number of points, so let's listen in, now, to

BASIL WELLS

First I would mention these so-called big names. Into the blazing pit with all their stories unless they have a genuine, new idea back of them. Smooth writing doesn't cut any ice with sf readers if it is worked into a standardized hack yarn. That's why sf has been such a success—the readers are getting fed up on the boom-boom sagas of the woolly west with their stock sheriffs, horseback rescues, and daisy-pure damsels. So let's not have any frozen formula plots. There are enough of the newer writers with unconventional new ideas to keep us guessing as to what is coming next issue. Sure, publish two or three of the old standbys: Keller, Hamilton, Williamson, Kummer (sometimes), and Rocklynne, for example, but lean a lot heavier toward Gottesman, Lavond, Astrov, D. B. Thompson, Corwin, and the dozen or score more of the newcomers who are just getting under motion and will later feel a warm spot in their hearts for the mag that helped them get to the top. They're headed there, too. How about putting this question squarely up to the readers and being guided by their majority decision?

As my letter appearing in the November issue of FUTURE FICTION suggested, I am stuck on your title. Of all the sf pulps on the market, it has the most conservative, yet appealing title as yet to appear. And thanks be to Mughla, the covers have come of age! The last two have been positively attractive. I hope next issue to see the interiors come up to the level of the title and cover, or take a great stride in that direction at least.

Let's see an enlarged letter section with the smaller printing that permits more letters' inclusion. And don't forget to comment on them. Fan letters can make or break an sf mag. Station X should set a pace for the FUTURE. Keep Futurian Times, featuring a book review or so by Wellhelm, Dikty or some other well-known fan, along with other material. Give us more Bok, Paul, and Finlay from time to time, but try two, three or four of the new artists now appearing in competing magazines. Keep the readers guessing as to what type of stories you feature and then don't adhere to any one frozen policy.

In closing, let me ask for more short stories. One longish novel, two novelettes, and about six shorts would balance the fare—to my way of thinking—just fine.

Box 12, Springboro, Penna.

Well, Mr. Wells, it goes like this. We really aren't prejudiced about names either way. After all, you just asked for names in your letter. Only, these are new names. But, remember, you didn't ask for any particular stories, didn't even mention types of stories. You just asked for "stories by . . ."

Now that would seem to indicate that there's a certain magic in the name of an author, you've come to know. And, remember, we have to use every gram of appeal we can possibly obtain because there are just oodles of magazines on display and it's very easy to miss a particular one unless you're looking for it. Even then, you may be sidetracked. So, we still cling to some of the oldtime names . . . that is, when we can get stories we like from them. We ask ourselves: "Would we want this yarn if it were by someone we'd never heard of before?" And unless the answer is an unqualified yes, back it goes.

So, thanks for writing, Mr. Wells, and let's hear from you again. Now, a few words from

MYRON SCHWARTZ

The best story in your April issue was "A Prince of Pluto" by Paul Dennis Lavond. I have seen Lavond's stories before in other magazines, in fact there is a veritable deluge of them in the latest issues of other magazines, but never as good as this. It is one of the funniest satires on science fiction I have ever read, and very ably written. I do not see how there could be a sequel to it, but I wish the author would write another one in the same style. The illustration was all right, but should have shown the scene where the Prince kills the policemen by hypnosis. (He didn't kill the cops; he just knocked them cold.—Ed.)

Second best was "The Radiant Avenger," by E. A. Grosser, which had a novel idea, well handled. It was very nicely illustrated, in a bizarre fashion, by Dave Kyle. This was not as good as some of Grosser's others, but it was still quite good. A sequel could be written here, also. I would suggest that you use more stories by Grosser, and Lavond, too, of course.

The other stories were fair, the worst being Mrs. Weinbaum's stupid effusion. (We believe the lady is Miss Weinbaum, the sister of the late Stanley G. Weinbaum.—Ed.) The remainder of the illustrations, except the one by Bok, were bad. But the cover was excellent. I am glad to see that you no longer clutter up your covers with unnecessary printing.

"Fantasy Times" (Please, Mr. Schwartz!—Ed.) was very good this issue, though you should give more space to it and a little larger print. "Station X" presented a very interesting letter by Graham Conway, and one that I agree with, except that "The Flat Folk of Vulcan" was much better than Conway depicts it. It was a very enjoyable story, certainly much better than "30th Century Duel" in this issue! Conway's remarks on "How to Write Science Fiction" by Derwin Lesser were very true, and highly appreciated. But I did not like what Mr. Conway said about the fan magazines. I have read a good many of the magazines referred to in "Fan Mag Digest", and I am sure that Mr. Conway hasn't. With only a few exceptions they are interesting and edited by intelligent fans who know what they want in the way of sf and how to get it.

I'll write again when I see your next issue.
New York City

Thanks for that last line, Mr. Schwartz. In regard to a sequel to "A Prince of Pluto", we had a recent confab with Lavond, and we have a sneaking suspicion that some day we're going to find a sequel on our desk. We'd hoped he might ship it to us in time for this issue, but, alas . . . disappointment. But we do not believe in rushing an author, holding firmly to the conviction that you readers would rather wait another issue than read something Lavond, or anyone else, hampered out to meet a deadline. We'll let Mr. Conway speak for himself as to whether or not he's actually read the mags referred to in his letter. So, Mr. Schwartz, let us introduce you and the rest of our audience to

J. S. KLIMARIS

Mr. Conway's vitriolic outburst in the letter column of April's FUTURE FICTION if accomplishing nothing more, at least prompts me to a spirited defense of the new editor. (Who, me?—Ed.) Come now, Graham, April FUTURE FICTION wasn't also that bad? In fact, when one glances over the myriad collections of tripe that pass for "science fiction" (with the emphasis on "science") one might find a point or two in favor of FUTURE FICTION. At least there are indications in the April issue which lead one to look more optimistically towards the future.

"The Radiant Avenger" and the "Prince of Pluto" in spite of the illustrations, were rather good. Is it your new policy to reprint a short story in every issue? I'm heartily in favor of reprints of famous shorts, but I draw the line at novels or novelets. Too many of them are still fresh in the memory.

"Genius Bureau" had a splendid idea—the dilemma of a genius bureau confronted with the problem of finding a check for itself is brilliant. Unfortunately the writer did not do justice to it. The treatment is shoddy. But perhaps I am unjust in expecting any story with the name "Weinbaum" to be a brilliant piece of writing as well as ordinary fiction.

"Status Quo"? Phah! "Dr. Pixley utilized the free energy in the universe . . ." What marvellous evasion! I'd prefer that scientific concepts not be touched upon at all rather than tossed about so gaily and nonsensically.

"30th Century Duel"—for shame, Wellman, for shame!

For your coming issues, Mr. Lowndes, I do wish you'd pay a bit more attention to the quality of your stories. There has been so much dunge published under the heading of "science fiction" that I am hoping you are sensible enough to realize that the mere mention of "rocket", "ray gun", "atom", "Martian", etc., in a manuscript does not automatically make it a readable short story. For God's sake publish short stories that a man can read without being ashamed of the rotten stuff flowing all around us.

With best wishes for FUTURE's future success.

46 Ten Eyck Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.

The fact is, Mr. Klimaris, we haven't any default policy on reprints. Once in awhile, we get the opportunity to obtain rights on certain of the oldtime stories which were well-liked when published. In such cases, we try to pick one which we've heard fans aud/or readers say they would like to see again, or would like to get a chance at, their having missed it the first time. No, we

didn't send out 50,000 or 20,000 or even one thousand cards to our readers asking if they wanted to see "Martian Guns". But we did satisfy ourselves that this tale was welcome enough to justify our using the term "reprinted by popular request". You see, our quorum of voting readers is not very large, particularly in relation to the magazine's total circulation. It's not as we'd like it to be; everyone who buys FUTURE FICTION has a franchise to sway us as they can with their letters and votes on particular questions. But only a small percentage exercise that franchise.

Now, if you, sir, will please step this way. That's right; right up here. The milke is more scared of you than you could possibly be of it. Thank you. What name? Oh yes,

ALLEN CLASS

I have just finished reading the latest issue of FUTURE FICTION and am pleased to note a considerable improvement. What happened? Did you or someone else discontinue its publication for one issue?

Concerning the cover: I don't care if red doesn't fit into our concepts of space, I like it. I wish, however, that the cover would bear a resemblance to some story in the mag. (It did. Cover showed a scene in "30th Century Duel". Womack is blasting away at Dundin's ship in an effort to brake its plunge toward Venus.—Ed.) I see the titles have been taken out of those boxed spaces on both mags. Good for someone! There wasn't a story in the whole issue that I disliked. My choice for first place goes to Helen Weinbaum's "Genius Bureau". Here's how I rate the stories of this issue. (1) "The Genius Bureau", (2) "A Prince of Pluto", (3) "The Radiant Avenger", (4) "30th Century Duel", (5) "Martian Guns", and (6) "Status Quo".

The interior decorations were all pretty good except the one for "Radiant Avenger". Kyle did a much better one for "Genius Bureau". This fellow Burford has a unique style, if you can call it that.

If you publish any more like the November issue, I'll send you a culture of the Martian virus, "the stooping sag". Scarcely have I read an issue of any magazine to compare with it. The only magazine I can think of that might be "Science Fiction". The story, "Science from Syracuse" was a black libel and the author must be pretty hard up for ideas when he writes this sort of tripe.

Please get some good stories, Mr. Lowndes, and the fans will speak your name in reverent awe. Enlarge the letter department, give us more humorous stories, and a little fantastic fantasy. You know, the kind you've been writing lately. Less super adventure stories. Hopefully yours.

518 Tremont Ave., SW, Massillon, Ohio

Shucks, Mr. Class, you wouldn't give a poor, defenseless editor the "stooping sag" now, would you? When he's already afflicted with grey hair, dandruff, near-sightedness, polydactylia, and petal blight? When the last named is ready at any moment to become the dread petal blight virulencia? We saw a horrible case of the latter once, one of Manly Wade Wellman's cutest Martiennes. She had the loveliest violet petals — then, overnight, they became a sickly rustish color, and slowly petrified to fall with a dull clank one by one, to the floor. And now you want to give us the stooping sag. This is too much. We can't endure it. We're going to sit down and sniff smelling salts while the next reader takes over—up! look who it is!

GRAHAM CONWAY

So FUTURE FICTION has got a new editor. The difference is noticeable, but only slightly. The cover is better, but that's probably not your province. No Esperanto! Glory be! I am pleased to see that "Fantasy Times" has been given the bum's rush—gad, what a piece of consummate rubbish that was, and totally unrepresentative of the fan field. Futurian Times is an improvement. I approve of the make-up of your letter column, one letter by Graham Conway is entirely sufficient for any well-balanced column.

Your stories do not show any terrific improvement, just the same. "30th Century Duel" was a pile of hacked out rat-bait. "The Genius Bureau" was lousy—using the name of Weinbaum to get the vilest claptrap past an editorial desk! That story was stupid, poorly written, and altogether as bad or worse than stories in former issues. Capitalizing on a dead man's name is an outrage, more so when it helps drag down that man's good reputation. "Martian Guns" was a swell yarn, as always, but why reprint it? Your blurb says "by popular request" It is reprinted. I defy you to prove that anyone at all requested it. I defy you entirely and utterly! (Observe the answer to Mr. Kilmars' letter above. We'll accept your apology, sah, next issue.—Ed.)

"Status Quo" was a fair yarn. Unscientific but passable. "The Radiant Avenger" was o. k. "A Prince of Pluto" was good. Surprising! Humor was something missing under the former editor.

So what, Mr. Lowndes, so what? Essentially, FUTURE FICTION is still only so-so. Better than before but still—it has improved from a low grade of rubbish to a high grade of mediocrity. Some day you'll give some of those hacks the boot for good and open the door to more Princes from Pluto and give FUTURE FICTION a future.

Waterloo, Indiana.

We have put away the smelling salts, Mr. Conway, even though these bits of praise sprinkled lightly through your letter were something of a shock. You're a hard man to please, eh? Well, we'll try to make another thrust up with each issue, but we can't devote our efforts solely to pleasing you in particular. Not because you are you, but because a lot of readers, apparently did not think "The Genius Bureau" was so utterly bad. In fact, as you see, one reader thought it tops in the issue, and didn't consider the other stories poor, either. Then there's "30th Century Duel." That story, on the whole was liked. And it just isn't sensible to stop using a type of story that is generally liked on the grounds that a few readers dislike it intensely. All we can do is try to give you enough stories you do like so that you'll tolerate those which make you ill.

Despite the strong tones you use, we appreciate your letters. And we will admit quite frankly that we are not, as yet, entirely satisfied with FUTURE FICTION. We feel that our April issue was an improvement over former numbers; we think that the present issue is an improvement over the April one. And we hope to leave this issue behind in more ways than one with the coming number. Eventually we expect to hit a level and lay a solid floor under it. Then really start building.

Here, readers, is an example of the widely

divergent reactions we receive upon stories. Lend an ear to

HARRY JENKINS, JR.

Congratulations for a swell first ish for you. Or is it your first? (It was.—Ed.) The April issue of FUTURE FICTION was the first I have seen in Columbia in a long time. Circulation of SCIENCE FICTION doesn't even exist. But the April issue was the best yet, and I've read every issue except two, which means I've read 3/5ths of them.

Gallop ghoulish ghosts and stuff. Paul at his best on this cover. Despite the typical outlandish covers he uses, Mr. Paul can still have my vote as one of the top three s-f illustrators. The lower spaceship seems wrong somehow, and if you take a look at it, it is very striking. But on the whole, the Paul will reign over all April s-f covers. One star for FUTURE!

In the illustration for Wellman's swell story, Paul's Powerful Palpitating Pantaloons appear again. When will the old master abandon his drear defect of purifying pantalons. Sssh, I'm afraid no one but Yngvi knows! (And you know who he is. Incidentally, friends, don't be deceived by biased reports: Yngvi is not a louse!—Ed.) Dave Kyle's pic for "Genius Bureau" and Paul's for Bell's tale are passable, but the others are gosh-awful. I know you have already received numerous requests such as this, but may I reiterate some other fantasy bug's plea for Bok and Finlay? (awrk! We have Bok! He drew for "Status Quo" in the April issue and "Stone Men of Ignora" this time. Ed.) Kyle is fair and is improving rapidly, so I have no aversion to his continuing.

"Genius Bureau" started out to be a boring short, but as I struggled along with it, I actually liked the darn thing! But sooch an ending, sooch an ending. Paging Isaac Asimov! Paging Asenion! Where is our favorite lady chaser?

E. A. Grosser is definitely and quite assuredly a pen name. Could it be "Hotfoot"? (Nope. Grosser isn't Gottesman.—Ed.) Would like to know who it is, but haven't the slightest idea. However, "The Radiant Avenger" started out like one of the comic-book superman stories, and I would gladly have stopped except for the excellent way in which it was handled. But sooch an ending, sooch an ending. Paging Mr. Asimov! Pag—

Paul Dennis Lavond, after graduating from Spaceways, is doing a fine job in the pros, this being the third story I've read of his in the last couple of months. The plot wasn't exceptional; writing was super-colossal, but, darn it, the Martian prince captivated me. (Ye gods, so melodramatic—captivated.) Paging—oops, no girls this time.

Futurian Times has clicked with the entire Columbia Camp! Tho the news is old, it is still interesting and will win followers among the fans, I think. Thanks a million for banishing the old column. Is the Times section for Futurians only? (Not at all; open to all followers of FUTURE FICTION.—Ed.)

Well, Doc, seems like I've run out of talkables, but I'll be looking forward to the next FUTURE FICTION if it is as good as this issue.

2409 Santee Avenue, Columbia, S. Carolina.

Which is all for now, friends and fans. Thanks for listening, and we'll be back on this same wavelength next issue. Cheerio all.

RWL.

THE STONE MEN OF IGNOTA

by VICTOR ROUSSEAU

(Author of "The Beetle Horde," "World's End," etc.)

Caught by the gravital drag of the tramp asteroid, the two spacemen found themselves on a world fantastic beyond their wildest dreams. A world where great chitinous monsters built roads and structures for the lovely woman-creatures who ruled Ignota.

But the stones they used were living men!

"IT'S ABOUT TIME you woke up," growled Bill Donovan, as Jim Rust came forward into the tiny control-room. "I'm finding out what's wrong. She's here."

His finger-tip scraped the chart. "Right here, Jim. Now look at the needle."

The black needle on the space-compass was quivering two points off the red one underneath. Bill brought it back to superposition. He withdrew his hand and the needle moved back again.

"You're sure you set the red needle to absolute zero of gravity, Bill?"

"Look for yourself. There's our position. There are the log tables. Now—what?"

Jim Rust pored over the logarithms. Bill's computation seemed correct. With the red needle set at absolute zero — that is to say, the point at which the pull of all the heavenly bodies was completely neutralized, any deviation of the superimposed black needle indicated that they were moving into the field of space-warp, or gravitation, created by some planet.

On this space-compass all navigation depended as surely as sea-navigation on the magnetic compass in ancient days. On this and on the little thread of helium at 457.51 below zero on the old Fahrenheit scale,

the 2.19 degrees above absolute zero, at which helium develops its intense anti-gravitational force. That tiny thread of liquid helium in the tube was mightier than all the out-moded rocket systems.

The two men stared at each other. Bill said:—

"Then the tramp asteroid really does exist, Jim. That's what's pulling us. Jupiter's out of the question. He's a convenient explanation for almost everything, but, you see, there wasn't any deflection of that needle when I took over the controls, and Jupiter's at least a million miles further away from us by now."

"A tramp asteroid—with an orbit as eccentric as Halley's Comet—passing far outside the bounds of the solar system and barely influenced by Jupiter. It sounds incredible, Bill. And you haven't seen it?"

"Not a glimpse of it. If it's more than five hundred miles diameter it would be visible. There's only the one explanation, Jim."

It had to be. You couldn't have an asteroid so tiny that it was invisible through the high-powered, but necessarily small Cassegrain telescope in the space-ship, unless—

Jim Rust nodded. "Matter condensed as tightly as in a white dwarf star, Bill. A cubic inch weighing—how much? A ton?"

"Four or five hundred pounds,



maybe. I've only been able to make a very rough computation."

"A good thing to stay away from. How close can we get to check up for the Observatory without danger of crashing her?"

"I've been trying to figure that out too. That's why I said it was about time you woke up, Jim . . . Look at that needle!"

The black point was oscillating in an alarming manner. Point by point it was moving away from the red toward the end of the dial. Bill wrenched at his controls. The needle swung back, then began to move to the right again. Bill beckoned to

Jim to take the controls. He began figuring, jotting down column after column . . .

HOURS later they were still sitting side by side in the control section of the tiny space-ship, with death looming more and more imminent.

The little yellow sun burned in a firmament ablaze with stars. No longer circling, the familiar constellations kept their places unchanged. Now, through the telescope, they could discern Ignota—the unknown asteroid, as it had been provisionally christened by the astronomer who

had deduced its existence from certain aberrations in the pull of the inner planets.

With a periodicity of uncounted thousands of years, it was rushing out of the depths of space to circle the sun. You could have called it a comet, but its pull was a million times that of any comet; maybe it would grow a tail when it approached the sun. Anyway, it was a planetoid—a tiny planetoid that gave out neither heat nor light, invisible, yet throwing the inner planets off their courses.

Its orbit had been roughly computed. But the American Observatory had refused to admit its existence until these aberrations forced them to send Bill Donovan to investigate. That had been three weeks before. In those three weeks Ignota hadn't stood still.

A rock, irregularly shaped, just now beginning to pick up a little albedo from the sun. Rushing toward the space-ship, or, rather, pulling the little ship surely, remorselessly, so that she tugged and strained like a balky mule. The surge of the helium thread in the tiny tube was evidence of the struggle.

"How far away do you think she is?" asked Jim.

"How do you expect me to get a parallax in this crazy ship?" retorted Bill. "Less than a million miles, that's sure. I'm trying to pass her by adding her pull to our own atomic power. If that doesn't work, we'll reverse engines and try to hold out till Mars can help us."

He pointed to the chart. "Mars is coming up here. And he's our only hope. If we can hold off for two Earth-days, we'll use Mars as the fulcrum of our lever, and catapult ourselves out of Ignota's attraction."

There wasn't any sleeping now.

Through the hours that followed, the two remained crouched in the control-room, Jim at the controls, Bill covering page after page of paper with his computations.

And, with inexorably increasing swiftness, the little planetoid was pulling the ship toward her. Bill's aim had been to utilize Ignota's pull to enable the ship to pass her and become a temporary satellite, till the increasing tug of Mars enabled the atomic engines to function freely. That wasn't to be. When the needle of the speedometer ran off the dial, Bill reached over Jim's knee and jerked into reverse. The space-ship shuddered, the needles swung crazily; the bubble in the helium tube ran races from side to side.

Still balking, even though her speed was greatly diminished the ship swung forward toward Ignota, now looming, a vast black moon, in the eidoscopic mirror.

In the nightmare that followed, neither man uttered a word. Haggard from want of sleep, Bill and Jim waited. There would of course be no atmosphere on Ignota. There would be no flaming death. Just a crash that would reduce ship and men instantly to powder, unless—

"Bill, we're slowing."

"Yeah, Mars is on the job. Not soon enough, though."

Ignota filled all space. The ship was still plunging toward the planetoid with frightful velocity. There wasn't any hope now from the ruddy planet that had vanished behind Ignota's grim black headlands.

"Space-suits!" barked Bill.

They drew them from the little locker and zipped them on. Of course it wasn't any use. The barium dioxide in their helmets would give out oxygen enough to last for days, under the "cold heat" supplied by the

little generator—if they managed to land alive.

That "if" was an infinitesimal possibility. The hours of suspense before them had dwindled to minutes. The two men tensed themselves.

"Air-gear!" snapped Bill.

The space-ship trembled like a blown leaf as the meshes clicked. Air-gear, starting-gear, carried the little craft at no more than five hundred miles an hour. How far would the helium slow that pace, against Ignota's pull?

But the needle in the little air-gear circle on the speedometer was moving back. Three hundred miles an hour—two hundred—one fifty—

They caught their breath, watching the needle move with torturing slowness. One hundred now—ninety—eighty—

That little thread of helium against gravity plus inertia! Within a huge hollow cup appeared an amazing meadow of tall, green-gray plants, the black rocks towering in a circle around it. At the last moment Bill Donovan cut his engine, flung wide the panel-door . . .

HE WAS lying on his back with one leg doubled under him. He had a feeling of well-being. Through the vitrophane of his mask he could see the tall plants growing about him, rooted in a soil of colorless crystals. Nitrogen peroxide, of course, the residue of an atmosphere that the planetoid must have once possessed. There were nitrogen compounds on other planetoids, sustaining a sort of vegetation that had adapted itself to an airless life.

Bill couldn't tell how long he had been lying there, of course, but he was fully conscious, and he could see quite clearly. The sun was a pale disk in a black sky spangled with

stars. The ridges of the rocks formed a horizon. The meadow extended for indefinite miles, everywhere the same green-gray color. Here and there were rocks and stones of black or gray. Bill couldn't see the space-ship. It must be behind him. Smashed, of course. He had no memory of the final moments, but he had evidently been thrown free of it.

"Jim!" he called, and was gratefully surprised to hear Jim's answer. The radio was unbroken, and from the clarity of the reply it was clear that the barium filings were producing oxygen enough for sound and breathing.

"I'm here. Where are you?" came Jim's voice.

"I'm here. I can't see you."

"I can see you all right. You're on the starboard side of the ship. I've been lying here for hours, calling you from time to time. Thought you were dead."

"Why didn't you come to me?" demanded Bill.

"I can't. I'm paralyzed. My back's broken. What's the matter with you?"

Bill made to rise. He couldn't stir more than a toe and a finger. He tried again and again. He could writhe a little, and that was about all.

"I'm paralyzed too," Bill grunted.

"What? Can't you crawl? I can only move my fingers."

"Same here."

"Then what? Which is going to give out first, the oxygen or our bellies, or the heating systems? It's 459.7 below zero outside our masks—just one millimeter away."

"Cut out the humor, Jim. How's the ship?"

"She looks all right. That was a beautiful pancake landing you made.

We've got to do something. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to think. Shut up!" said Bill.

He tried again to move. He worked each finger of either hand in turn. He was trying to remember his physiology. If the nerves controlling all the digits were in working order, could he have a broken spine? Ditto his toes, as far as he could move them separately inside his thermotex. The fifth nerve—the seventh nerve—

Bill couldn't remember where the nerves issued from the spine, but he didn't believe he was paralyzed. And now another explanation was beginning to glimmer in him . . .

He heard a yell from Jim Rust. His own answer died on his lips. Something was coming toward him. A moving something, man-like, but the caricature of a man, as some of the first spacemen might have imagined a denizen of another planet.

Eight feet in height, no vestige of hair or clothing, but covered with chitinous plates like an invertebrate. A thread of a body, leaving no space for lungs to function, a head with side-set eyes, and a huge mouth from which a bunch of partly masticated grass protruded. All the rest arms and legs. Two arms, two legs, but of enormous thickness, the chitinous plates that covered them bulging from the play of the muscles beneath.

Such limbs were never created by Nature in a moment of jest. Now Bill knew.

"We're not paralyzed," he yelled. "It's gravity that's pinning us down!"

There was only a splutter in answer. And another of the monsters came stalking into sight. It was about the same size as the first. It was carrying Jim in two huge, shell-

cased hands, and Jim was lying still as a stone.

Into the picture came a gang of the monsters — twelve of them at least. They were staggering along beneath the weight of the little space-ship — twelve hundred pounds on Earth, incalculable tons on Ignota. But it was hard going. Bill's mind registered that. Even the strength of Ignota's men had limits. And, though there was no possibility of expression upon those chitinous masks, the bearers somehow looked rebellious.

JIM Rust, who was being carried ahead of him, had found his voice. Bill didn't know whether or not he had got the idea across to him about the gravity of Ignota. He was trying to figure out what was likely to happen to him, and the most probable thing was that he was going to provide a fine cannibalistic feast.

He could see that his bearers were traversing a track through the grass. Now and again one of them would slip over the edge, and flounder for a moment or two in the white, yielding nitrogen peroxide soil. Their strength and weight must be enormous. Nature might have overcome the gravitation problem by creating a race of featherweights. She never did the obvious thing. Bill mused, till Jim's splutter came back to him: "Bill, they're building a palace! They're civilized! Bill, can you see?"

Bill could see other monsters approaching along side-tracks, that seemed to merge into a central road some distance ahead. Each of them had a stone in his arms. Maybe they had mistaken Jim and himself for stones! Bill tried to crane his neck, but that was impossible. He could only lie there, hearing his own circu-

lation and Jim's disjointed utterances, till suddenly he saw what Jim had spoken of.

The trail ended in a wide road, running straight toward an enormous structure, a cyclopean wall, flanked with immense turrets, on top of which hundreds of the monsters were at work, receiving stones from human ladders below, and laying them in place with amazing dexterity and swiftness. How high that wall or facade was to go, there was no guessing, but already it must have been the equivalent of ten stories, and it looked three hundred yards in length.

This wasn't all: this was only the front of the building; the sides and rear were rising with equal facility. Gaps in the facade indicated where windows were to be inserted.

And all over the wide plain, whose grasses had been trodden down, leaving a colorless soil of nitrogen peroxide, scores of the monsters were trailing, each carrying his burden of an enormous stone.

Something about these stones attracted Bill's attention. Something too incredible for belief. Not till he had stared at the roadway for some time could he bring himself to believe it.

The roadway was moving. More correctly writhing, for every foot of it was in slight oscillatory motion. Now, as one of the monsters who carried Bill shifted him in his massive arms, Bill could look down and see.

The roadway was composed of stones in the crude shape of human beings. Stone men, with truncated limbs and aborted fingers. But living men.

The roadway had been recently constructed, for the bodies were writhing in a sort of cement. And, looking closer, Bill saw that they

were more nearly human than he had supposed. It was the cement that gave them their monstrous appearance, filling the interstices between them.

Stubby fingers protruded through this mortar, toes—of stone—moved feebly; and the road was like an enormous serpent, half-interred, and writhing sluggishly in its effort to free itself.

Now the road ceased to writhe. The passage of the motile monsters had crushed down stone men and cement, to form a smooth bed, much as a macadam road is smoothed and levelled off by traffic.

Jim was yelling: "They're alive. Stone men! Buried alive! That's what they're going to do to us."

Bill hadn't the heart to answer. Then, a moment later: "Bill, there's a woman here. A woman queen!"

BILL Donovan saw her. No different from an Earth-woman, except that she was a little taller and more ethereal. The outlines of her body were slightly dim, nebulous. But she was real enough. Jet-black hair flowing about her shoulders. Two eyes turned curiously upon the two Earth-men as their bearers brought them to her and stopped at a signal of her outstretched hand. And that hand was human, and the bones of her grew where they should grow, inside her flesh.

A long garment, apparently woven of asbestos or some similar stone, covered her from head to ankles, exposing two bare but, again, perfectly human feet.

She raised her hand to her lips and moved her lips as if whistling. It didn't seem possible that any whistle could sound without an atmosphere, but the result was amazing. For out of apertures among the

stones a score of girls came running toward their queen.

Running? Rather gliding, and covering several feet with every bound. A bevy of girls, none of them much above twenty years, sweet-faced and smiling, gathering about their leader and inspecting Bill and Jim with curiosity on their faces.

They touched their thermotex garments. The expressions on the girls' faces were perfectly human. It was clear to Bill that they considered the thermotex part of their bodies—a sort of flexible chitin.

There wasn't any possibility that they could hear him; just the chance that his voice, translated into the hertzian waves, might impinge upon some specialized brain-centre through their ears. He shouted. No, they didn't hear him. They were examining Jim now, and Bill seemed to know why. They were looking at his hair. None of the servant monsters had any hair—they were evidently a different race. And Bill and Jim had hair, like the girls. But Jim's was red.

They gathered about him, pointing and making little finger-movements to one another, like deaf-mutes. Suddenly they started back. The dozen monsters who carried the space-ship came into view.

Bill looked at it. It didn't seem to have suffered any injury. The rounded keel was spattered with nitrogen peroxide, but Bill, in his last conscious moments, had balanced the forward glide against Ignota's pull, so that the ship had settled down uninjured.

Twelve feet away from him—and he couldn't stir hand or foot to go to it!

The girls were moving gracefully about the ship, looking at the smooth hull, peering through the vitrophane

space-shield. The panel-door that Bill had opened had, of course, swung shut, but still, the girls might have attempted to find the push-button and enter.

They didn't, and Bill began to realize that they didn't understand there was an interior. They saw the inside of the space-ship as one with the exterior hull.

"Bill! Bill!" Jim Rust was calling in a cracked voice. He had been calling all along, but Bill had been too preoccupied with his investigations to answer him. Besides, he was being held head downward, which wasn't conducive to conversation.

"Bill, if we could make the ship. Maybe we could get away somehow. They're going to make a road out of us. Did you see, Bill?"

"You've got nothing to worry about, after the way that queen looked at you," said Bill, with a touch of venom.

"But Bill, listen! Can't you move—somehow? That gravity you spoke about—maybe we can do something—"

Bill wasn't listening any more. He was noticing the actions of the monsters, who, he had begun to realize, were the servants of the Ignota girls.

Again their chitinous masks remained blank, but—maybe it was telepathy, but Bill was convinced that they bore no good will toward the fair denizens of Ignota. Especially the dozen who had carried the space-ship, and were now standing as if their muscles hurt them under their bony sheaths.

Suddenly the girls turned away. The queen gestured toward the ship. The monsters stood, swaying uncertainly, their huge limbs hanging at their sides.

(Continued On Page 76)

"Huh, ME read a book on **SEX?**"

**.. ALL RIGHT,
SMARTY — JUST
LISTEN TO THIS!**

You married one of the sweetest girls in the world. She loved you—and you loved her. But the happiest day of her life became the most tragic. Why? Because you **THOUGHT** you knew it all!

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In a twinkling the queen's face changed from smiles to fury. Her hand went with lightning speed inside her asbestos garment. And then Bill knew that it was all a dream. For she pulled out a little furry thing—an unmistakable mouse.

The monsters sprang away in terror, hands clutching convulsively at their throats. Maybe there was a space between the chitin and the underlying flesh at that spot. If so, a mouse might work havoc. Especially if there was no way of getting it out.

Backs stooped in submission; grotesque chitinous faces were upturned in expressionless appeal. The queen put the mouse back—wherever she had taken it from.

The twelve took up the space-ship again. Bill's burden-bearers started forward. Ahead of him he could see Jim's, jogging along.

NOW they were moving in a dense throng of the monsters, each carrying a stone. A stone in the shape of a man, that writhed feebly in its arms. Jim was yelling incessantly.

"Shut up!" Bill shouted. "Well, what about it? On Ignota man's still in the stone age. They're using them to build their houses with. What about it? Yeah, you and me too. There's nothing we can do, so what's the use of borrowing trouble?"

It wasn't like Jim to give way to panic, but Bill could see very well what was coming to them. For they had reached the foot of the great towering wall. And every stone was in the semblance of a man. The mortar had not been poured as yet, but the stones had been so cunningly laid together that they fitted perfectly. Heads were laid in hollows of chests,

feet fitted into armpits. A set of half-a-dozen man-stones comprised a single rectilinear block. Man-weaving was quite an art on Ignota.

Bill thought that they were going to carry him up to the top. That wasn't the case at all. What happened to Jim gave Bill his first inkling. He saw Bill's burden-bearers poise themselves on their elephantine feet and hurl him upward. A monster on the block above caught him, turned, and tossed him to the man above him. Jim's yells of protest rang through Bill's helmet.

Then Bill, in turn, was flying through the air, and his body felt as heavy as lead. If the catcher missed him, there wouldn't be much left of him after a twelve-foot fall to the block below. But the monster on the step above caught him, and passed him on to the next. And the next. And the next. Nauseated and dizzy, with his blood pounding in his ears, Bill found himself on top of the wall at last.

He was not six feet distant from Jim, but he couldn't reach out his arm to him. Jim must have lapsed into temporary unconsciousness, for he wasn't trying to talk any more, and Bill was able to look about him.

He was lying on what looked like the topmost row, for in this central place the wall seemed to be completed, while on either side the monsters were still playing ball with the man-stones. Down beneath, the ethereal girls were gathered in a little group, the queen apparently supervising the work, though Bill couldn't imagine what her means of communication were. He could see her, a tiny figure. He hadn't seen many Earth-women who attracted him so much. He was conscious of a wild desire to take her away, save her, and make an Earth-woman of her.

What a sensation she would make on Earth!

"Yeah, she's some belle, that queen," came Jim Rust's voice.

"Listen," said Bill angrily, "just now you were all down and out because we're going to become stones in the palace. This isn't any time to be thinking about girls."

"I know it, Bill," answered Jim. "But it's not likely we'll ever be thinking about girls after they're through with us, so why not? Why not, I say? I'd like to take her back to Earth . . . Bill! Bill! Can you see? They're hoisting up the ship."

It was true. The Ignota monsters had formed another human ladder, each rung of which was composed of a dozen of them. The group at the bottom was raising the space-ship slowly . . .

"They'll never make it!" shouted Jim.

They made it. Neither Jim nor Bill had dreamed what strength lay in the mighty muscles beneath that chitinous armor. The space-ship sailed through the air, and was caught dexterously by the group above. Again and again; the space-ship came to rest on top.

Only it was fully twenty feet from Jim and Bill. There was no possibility in the world of reaching it. The quick hope that had flamed in Bill's heart vanished. He heard Jim groaning.

"Well, it looks like the end," he said, trying to make his voice sound cheerful.

He broke off, whistling. The girls were skipping up the blocks. Skipping was a good description, for they seemed to bound upward with hardly an effort, alighting ethereally upon their dainty feet. They lined the summit. They moved toward Jim and Bill. They made gestures to the

monsters who were grouped on top of the wall and all up and down it.

Somehow Bill understood what those gestures meant. Those arms, solemnly raised, those strained dramatic figures indicated that some religious ceremony was about to be performed, the worship of some powers preceding—what?

Bill's guessing was good. A line of monsters was coming from the left, carrying an enormous stone cauldron that must have weighed a ton and a half. A little mortar slopped over the edges as they moved.

Slopped wasn't exactly the word, for the creamy liquid, drawn by the pull of Ignota, fell down the sides like drops of lead.

Bill heard Jim yell. He seemed to have forgotten the queen at the sight of the cauldron.

SOME IDEA had simultaneously occurred to all the monsters. They were gathering into two groups, one on either side of the cluster of girls. The girls didn't seem to notice them, for they were gathering about Jim, looking at him, especially his hair. Bill got the idea that they were sacrificing him reluctantly, giving away their most precious thing, as it were, to propitiate their gods. They looked quite solemn now. Bill wished the queen was looking at him.

And then the storm broke.

Suddenly the monsters closed in on the girls, shambling toward them with their huge arms outstretched, each heavy finger clearly discernible in its chitinous sheath. Bill saw the consternation on the girls' faces as the gross creatures came swarming toward them from every side.

It was revolt—subhuman against human, as the two existed upon Ignota. And humanity had no weap-

ons, because it had held down the beast so long that revolt had become as unthinkable as revolt among the cattle in the fields.

Were there men upon Ignota? Bill was never to know the answer to that question. There were only the frightened girls, crowding together, and the monsters swarming down upon them, animated by a single will, like bees in a hive.

No weapons? Yes. From beneath her stone-woven robe the queen produced—not one mouse, but a whole brood of them. The foremost of the monsters drew back. Those behind forced them on. For an instant the tide seemed to turn. Then the queen dropped the little creatures, which vanished in a flash among the stones.

Her followers broke and fled, skipping high into the air above the clumsy monsters, which grasped at their trailing robes. Bill saw one caught, pressed down, obliterated under the tonnage of the huge monsters. Another, and another . . . Others, escaping, stood poised in terror on the high pinnacles of the walls.

That was when the stone-throwing began. Great blocks of living stones went hurtling through the air, and the stones themselves, each one composed of half-a-dozen living bodies, writhed as they flew, in their efforts to separate into their constituent portions.

Bill heard Jim groaning. No, that was himself. He was struggling as he had never struggled before to go to the assistance of the queen, now standing alone beside the spaceship. Somehow the monsters hesitated to attack their queen. Bill felt a little power come into his limbs. He moved them slightly. He could extend his arms. Was it a desperate exercise of will—or Mars, rising ruddy above the rim of circling

rocks? Mars, who might yet save them, if only they could get inside the ship? His pull was stronger now.

Bill could extend his arms, he could half-lift himself, but that was all. He groaned and dropped. And, in a horrid dream, he saw the queen of Ignota, standing defenseless, facing the monsters.

A stone went hurtling toward her. Easily she evaded it, but now there came another and another, any one of which would have ground her fragile body into that living wall. Bill put forth all his powers again. He was turning over. He could get no further.

One of the monsters had grabbed Jim and sent him flying at the queen. Next moment Bill felt himself seized. He struggled feebly against the monster's chitinous breast. The arms that held him were like stone. He felt himself flying through the air.

He toppled at the queen's feet, knocking her over. For an instant he lay stunned.

Jim's voice: "Bill! Wake up, for heaven's sake! Wake up! I've got her! Bill, the panel-door!"

Bill saw that the impact of Jim's body had jarred the panel-door open. And Bill was lying half within it and half out, and making frantic efforts to reach out to the controls. He himself was balanced against the rounded hull, not a yard away, his head within the opening.

THE QUEEN was crouched beside him. She was looking into his face in wonder, looking at his red hair. Perhaps there stirred within her the dim foreknowledge of a future race of Earth-men who were to descend from those of Ignota. But that, again, was something Bill would never know.

The monsters, each holding a stone

hugged to its breast, were ringing them. Only a few yards away, but somehow they seemed hesitant to rush in upon their queen. And she was still crouching over Jim, apparently oblivious of her danger.

Perhaps it was a spasm of jealousy that nerved Bill to his supreme effort. Or, again, maybe the pull of the red planet had lightened the gravity of Ignota. But somehow, inching like a worm, Bill crawled forward, across the crawling body of Jim Rust.

And, as if conscious of what they were trying to do, the queen was helping them, with fluttering hands that accomplished nothing. They passed over Bill's face and shoulders like moth-caresses.

Bill's shaking hand moved forward. His fingers touched the controls. Jim's hand was tremulous beside his own. Bill touched the starter, just as a rock impinged against the fragile tenseness of the duralloy hull.

The solar light flashed on above the controls. The little yellow thread of helium gleamed in the tube.

As the anti-gravitational force of the atomic engine filled the ship, suddenly Bill's limbs were galvanized into action. The weight and paralysis dropped away. Jim was already within the control-room, with the queen in his arms. Bill jerked the

lever of the panel-door, and it slid noiselessly to. And slowly the spaceship lifted.

For an instant it looked as if it was going to crash in the nitrogen fields below. Then the engine took hold, the pull of Mars accentuated the pace. Air-gear still—and underneath Bill saw the monsters, shambling bear-like to and fro upon the walls.

Then they had cleared Ignota's outer rim. Space-gear now! The outer needle of the speedometer moved swiftly through the thousands. With the closing of the panel-door the oxygen-register needle had moved almost to normal.

Then Bill realized that the queen was no longer with them. Jim had zipped off his space-suit and was bending over something . . .

Bill threw off his mask.

Something like a little stone doll.

He understood. Earth-bodies are designed to withstand an atmospheric pressure of fifteen pounds to the square inch of surface. But Ignota had no atmosphere, and its human denizens would be compressed in it like a body under a mile of water.

Best not to say anything to Jim now. Bill dialled his Earthward course on his space-compass under the beneficent watch of the red planet.

DON'T MISS

"THE MAN WHO WAS MILLIONS"

An Amazing Novelette in

SCIENCE FICTION — JUNE

A MILLION YEARS AND A DAY

by LAWRENCE WOODS

(Author of "Strange Return," "Black Flames," etc.)

The fate of humanity was in their hands. Read this story carefully, then see if you can work out a solution to the problem.

THEY STOOD before a table in the highest tower of the planet's greatest city. They stood silently, wondering half-fearfully because no other living things walked the way of this world. No vehicles moved along the highways; no farm-machines cultivated the vegetation of the continents; no seafarers roamed the decks of ships lying quietly in dock.

Yes, this was Earth—an Earth at peace. When they returned from space, it was as they now saw it. At the port the crew slept at their various posts, curled up in comfortable positions. Asleep, but not breathing; not breathing, yet still not dead. The bodies were still supple, nowhere a trace of dissolution or decay in evidence.

Everywhere throughout the city they found sleeping figures. In the factories, the stores, the theatres, and in the vehicles parked along the streets and to the side of the highways. There was no devastation, no destruction.

But no life.

David and Janice Sloane; Janice and David. Two together—alone with the dust and the sleepers. Dust piled high in drifts. How much time had passed out there in space? Windows broken by storms; signs torn down. But windows had been made safe from concussion and overhang-

ing signs were frowned upon as possible menaces in bombardment.

Bombardment. War. Yes, there had been a war, they saw, yet it had not gotten into full sway. Traces of preliminary mobilization could be found; that was all. They had pieced together what papers still legible and concluded the Second Hemispheric War had broken into reality three days before the sleep, that both sides had boasted of secret weapons.

"Humanity," observed David, "never really got far in its individual progression."

"That's hardly fair," she retorted. "It was only lack of complete news. We never had a chance to understand things. But we could do rather well, and we did go far."

They stood before the table in the highest tower of the planet's greatest city, and on that table lay the answer to their questions. The New World Army had devised a sleep-vibration which would put every man on half a world in a state of lethargy at the press of the proper buttons. They would cease what they were doing and lie down; that would be all. Machinery was now universally automatic and filled with safety devices. They would merely shut themselves off after a time.

The vibration went forth from secret broadcasting units set up at strategic points in the Old World,

blanketing every foot of territory.

The effect could be undone by sending forth another vibratory sequence from the same source. A cateleptic sleep, neither true sleep nor death, yet bearing some of the aspects of both. And when the Old World awakened, it was to be with the New World armies in complete control. No bloodshed; no bombardments, little or no destruction. The fighting equipment of the Old World would be captured; the men disarmed.

The war would have been over, ending in victory for the New World except for one factor. It lay in a dispatch upon the table, one opened after the buttons had been pressed. It was from the Intelligence Department—a report upon the secret weapon of the Old World. That secret weapon, though operating in a different manner, was identical with the sleep-vibration of the New World.

Thus the planet slept.

David and Janice. It was in their hands to determine whether or not the planet should awaken. Whether or not the sleepers should die. For the details of the vibration showed that a renewal would mean death. Yet, were they to restore the planet, it would be to war.

“RENEW IT!” exclaimed David. “We two will start fresh, start with every material thing that the planet has to offer for security and the building of a new race. We’ll teach the new people to think differently, to consider each other rather than themselves as individuals.

Janice shook her head. “No! Mankind has managed to survive and progress through every kind of war, disease, poverty, and ignorance. We are proof; we conquered space.

“If we try to start out anew, we’re only evading the question. We’ll

have a new race, yes. But how will they know what is good for them and what isn’t? Because we tell them? No. These men and women know from their own experience that war, poverty, ignorance, and disease have to be wiped out and that no one is going to do it for them. There’s no sense in trying to be little gods and wiping the slate clean. It just doesn’t solve anything.”

David lit a cigarette. “If we two are proof of mankind’s advance, then we can rebuild humanity without the rest. No, we’re not perfect, but we are good specimens, and better fitted for the task,” his eyes fell upon the generals asleep in their stuffed chairs, “than some.”

He strode to the window, looked down upon the quiet city and the sea beyond. “When we bring forth a new race it won’t be perfect, even from our point of view. But it will be free of so much of this which otherwise could only be cleared away after decades, perhaps centuries, of painful struggling.

“Look, Janice, if we found a race of savages suffering from the lack of simple agricultural and sanitation methods, would we just go on, assuming that they’d discover bacteria and farming methods themselves after a few more generations?”

She shook her head dubiously. There was something to what David said, yet . . . Humanity and a million years of evolution. Criminals and lepers; artists and scientists, men and women who only desired to be let alone, to live their own lives, who had no desire to interfere with others. Now. A million years . . . and a day . . .

She tossed her head back, letting her hair fall unhampered to her shoulders, then reached forward and pressed buttons in rapid succession.

ATTENTION!

Future Fiction announces a Prize Contest. You have just read Lawrence Woods' little tale, "A Million Years and a Day." But the story is not finished.

Which buttons did Janice press? Were they the controls to renew the sleep-vibration, leaving only David and her alive on Earth? Or were they the buttons which would send out the interference beams, neutralizing the vibration and awakening the world to the horrors of ultra-scientific war?

For the three best letters telling which controls Janice set in motion, and why, we offer, free, the original illustrations by Frank R. Paul and John Forte, Jr., appearing in this issue of **Future Fiction**. First prize winner has first choice, second has second choice, and so on. Winners will be announced in the next issue of **Future Fiction**.

Letters may be of any length and need not be especially prepared; they may be typed or hand-written (legibly) as is convenient. Contest closes July 31st, 1941.

All letters should be addressed to Editor, **Future Fiction**, 60 Hudson St., New York City, and should be marked "prize contest."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933.
Of **Future Fiction** published bi-monthly at Chicago, Ill., for October 1st, 1940.
State of New York
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Louis H. Silberkleit, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of this **Future Fiction** and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:
Publisher, Louis H. Silberkleit, 60 Hudson St., N. Y., N. Y.; Editor, Cliff Campbell, 60 Hudson St., N. Y., N. Y.; Business Manager, Samuel Dinerman, 60 Hudson St., N. Y., N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

Double Action Magazines, Inc., 60 Hudson St., N. Y., N. Y.; Samuel Dinerman, 60 Hudson St., N. Y., N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is-- (This information is required from daily publications only.)

LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT

(Signature of Publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 3rd day of October, 1940. Maurice Coyne (My Commission expires March 30, 1942.) Notary Public, Bronx Co. No. 164, Reg. No. 10-C-22; Cert. filed in N. Y. Co. No. 162, Reg. No. 2-C-43; Cert. filed in Kings [SEAL] Co. No. 146, Reg. No. 213.

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THE WEIRD AND THE FANTASTIC

an editorial by
ROBERT W. LOWNDES

EVER since regular discussions columns have been featured in magazines of the type of *Future Fiction*, aided and abetted by the various fan magazines, there has been an endless controversy over the definition of the terms "science fiction," "fantastic fiction," and "weird fiction." Numberless enthusiasts have attempted to put forth some sort of definition which could be taken by all as standard. Yet, no real standard of distinction has appeared.

We should like to put our two cents' worth in at this point.

To our minds, "science fiction" and "fantasy" belong in one class of imaginative expression; "weird fiction" in the other. For the weird tale is inevitably based upon superstition, fear, and the unknown. It has its roots deep in the primal feelings of bafflement and helplessness the first conscious men felt before the forces of nature, and the vast expanse of phenomena which, though beyond their limited senses, was constantly revealed to them. Disease, the many mysterious functions of their bodies, human psychology: these things could not be seen and combatted; only the results were manifest. Thus, having no other explanation than that of an arbitrary, fearful cosmos, wherein mysterious masters made a sport of living things, their concepts were steeped in what we know as superstition. And their many charms were twofold. They served to ward off "evil" or to give the magicker equally arbi-

trary powers over nature and thus over his fellow-beings.

"Science fiction" takes the opposite viewpoint. Far from being earthbound, tied up with the primal fears and desires for arbitrary power over his fellow-humans, science fiction draws its roots from the sheer (often selfless) curiosity of man. The desire to know, to analyze, and to synthesize. It assumes that there do, indeed, exist many phenomena and things outside of the grasp of our senses. But it further assumes that *all* phenomena are strictly subject to physical laws, laws which can, eventually, be discovered, thus making it possible both to understand and to control, or adapt oneself intelligently to, the phenomena.

"Fantasy" likewise assumes that all things have a scientific explanation. But in fantastic literature, there is seldom any attempt to explain the fantastic phenomena described in full, or to base it upon established facts. It is not equal, but rather parallel, to science fiction. It is not in the class with the fairy tale, the myth or legend, or other aspects of weird fiction.

Science fiction and fantasy, in common, look ahead to the future and to the further development of man with confidence and courage, even though, at times, the writer may draw a gloomy picture of future developments.

We should like to hear from our readers as to whether or not they consider this a good standard of definition for these terms.

FUTURAN TIMES

FUTURE FICTION'S UNIQUE DEPARTMENT

ALL OUT FOR DENVER

The third World's Science Fiction Convention will be held at Denver, Colorado, in the Colorado and Centennial Rooms of the hotel Shirley-Savoy, on July 4th, 5th, and 6th of this year. Fans are urged to consider the Hotel Shirley-Savoy for their headquarters while in Denver, inasmuch as the rates there are more reasonable than at any other hotel in Denver, and if a hundred or more delegates register there, the committee will be able to obtain the rooms for the proceedings without charge.

All fans who write ahead will be met at the bus depot and driven to the hotel. If your arrival is unheralded, you can obtain necessary information by calling committee member Roy Hunt Cherry 1067. Opening session will begin promptly at 9 A. M., Friday, July 4th.

A tentative program for the Convention is as follows: Friday morning, from 9 to 12, there will be an informal gathering where old acquaintances can be renewed and new contacts made. Here you will meet many of the editors, authors, and fans with whom you may be vicariously acquainted through reading of them in the various science fiction magazines. Editors Wollheim, Tremaine, Pohl, Weinberger, Palmer, and Lowndes are expected to be present. Mr. Tremaine, incidentally, is offering a \$25 cash award to the fan who overcame the greatest obstacles in making the Denvention. Authors E. E. Smith, Robert A. Heinlein, Willard E. Hawkins, A. E. Van Vogt, D. B. Thompson, Ross Rocklynne, Ralph Milne Farley, R. R. Winterbotham, S. D. Gottesman, Hugh Raymond, and many others are expected. Internationally known fans such as Forrest J. Ackerman, Mororo, Boh Tucker, Arthur J. Widner, Mark Reinberg, Erle Korbhak, Damon Knight, and many others will be present.

On the afternoon of Friday, the 4th, there will be speeches pertaining to various aspects of fantasy by the leading science-fictionists present. In the evening, the traditional costume party and auction of sf and fantasy items will be held.

Saturday the 5th will be devoted to business meetings. In the morning, members of the Colorado Fantasy Society will meet, members only admitted. Incidentally, if you have not joined the society, you can do so by writing to the convention committee by writing to Lew Martin, 12533 Rare Street, Denver, Colorado, and enclosing a check for your membership fee. The afternoon of the 5th will be given over to a general business meeting, open to all, where anything of relative importance will be discussed and the locale of next year's convention determined. Plans for entertainment are still tentative, but the committee guarantees something well worth one's attendance.

Sunday evening, the Denvention will officially terminate with a banquet in honor of Robert A. Heinlein, the official guest.

Anyone requiring further information should contact Lew Martin, committee secretary. Martin requests that membership fees be remitted by money order.

FANTASY FICTION FIELD ILLUSTRATED NEWS WEEKLY

For the fan, reader, and collector, a reliable weekly news-sheet is virtually a necessity. Such an unofficial organ of sf and fantasy exists in Fantasy Fiction Field Illustrated News Weekly, put out by Julius Unger, at 1109 Dahill Road, Brooklyn, New York. He is assisted in this undertaking by your editor, and the director of the Futurian Society of New York, John B. Michel, as well as by many of the sf and fantasy magazine editors who send on news releases and odd items of interest.

A feature of this sheet is its preview photographs of the covers on forthcoming issues of sf-fantasy magazines. In addition to these photo-previews, FFF often presents photos of fans, singly or in groups, or of fan activities, such as models and stage sets designed by clubs, etc.

The sheet runs from four to six pages per week, and contains any number of interesting departments and features. All in all, it's well worth your nickel.

BOSTON STRANGER CLUB HOLDS EASTERN CONFERENCE

A general open meeting for New England and East Coast fans was held in Boston, Mass., early this year. Sponsored by the Stranger Club, the gathering took place at the home of Dr. and Mrs. R. D. Swisher in Winchester, just outside of Boston proper. While the assembly was somewhat saddened due to a just-previous occurrence, the death of one of the Strangers' outstanding members, Karl Singleton, still an enjoyable afternoon and evening was had by all and much in the way of general fan-understanding accomplished.

Outstanding among the items on the program was the hearing of a record from the LAFPS and a general discussion centering around the many problems of fan organizations and their upkeep.

THE FANTASY AMATEUR PRESS ASSOCIATION

One of the most unique fan organizations ever to exist will celebrate its fifth birthday this year. We are referring to the Fantasy Amateur Press Association. This group, limited to active members, is modeled after larger organizations, such as the United Amateur Press Association, The American Amateur Press Association, etc. The feature of this club is the quarterly mailings: every three months, the official editor mails each member a copy of the official organ, the Fantasy Amateur, and, along with it, a copy of every publication, 50 or more copies of which members have sent him for inclusion. There are no restrictions, outside

of the minimum number of copies required, on publications; they range from tiny, one sheet affairs, to large-sized well-mimeographed or hectographed publications. Some of these latter such as Dr. R. D. Swisher's "Science Fiction Check List," H. C. Koenig's "Reader and Collector," Milton A. Rothman's "Mitty's Mag," Jack Speer's "Sustaining Program," and Don Wollheim's "Phantagraph" (which now has the distinction of being the oldest fan magazine published) have become regular features of the mailings.

The Fantasy Amateur Press Association, known to members either as the FAPA, or fah-pah, was organized in 1937 by Wollheim and John B. Michel and has continued to function steadily ever since. Membership is limited to fifty persons, inasmuch as many members use small tray hectographs and fifty copies of a publication is tops for these. Many well-known fans, in addition to the founders, have held office in the organization—Fred Pohl, Milton A. Rothman, Olon F. Wiggins, Harry Warner, and your editor, to mention a few.

Treasurer is Milton A. Rothman, and further information on the club may be obtained by writing him at 1740 P Street, NW, Washington, D. C.

FANS MAKE RECORDINGS OF THEIR MEETINGS AND ACTIVITIES

Records are the new rage in fandom, usually little ones the size of "kiddy records." But it's surprising the amount one can pack into these small spaces, and fans are beginning to work up a technique for getting the most out of it all. The Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society has sent out several recordings of things and stuff, most of which have been excellent. We've heard a number of them, the best being the Christmas greetings to the Boston Stranger Club.

THE SCIENCE FICTION FAN

The oldest monthly fan magazine in existence is Olon F. Wiggins' "Science Fiction Fan." Starting in 1936, as a printed medium, Wiggins was not deterred upon finding that fan-supplication was insufficient for the mag in its original form; he merely ceased having it printed and turned to the hectograph as a means of duplication. Many of fandom's elite have written for this magazine from the very start and it retains a high position despite the inauspicious start and numbers of competing fan magazines.

NOTE

Futurian Times is not limited to any one group or organization. All fans are invited to make use of this department by sending material to your editor. We advise such submissions be as dateless as possible inasmuch as it often happens that particular items cannot be fitted in soon enough to make them timely.

THE BARBARIANS

by WILLIAM MORRISON

They were so far behind the times, these inhabitants of Hesperides, colonists of both Mars and Earth. It was plain to see from the crude warfare in which they engaged that they were little more than barbarians. But there was a surprise in store for the observers sent from Earth to see how the little world was getting along. A big surprise.



"These people are not quite so primitive . . . those are robots."

IT WAS A beautiful world, this Hesperides, planet of Sol's smaller brother sun, and under happier circumstances both Mal Ventner and his wife, Helen, would have enjoyed seeing it. They had

landed on a vast rolling grassy plain from whose every direction the minor sun's rays sparkled as if reflected from heaps of emeralds. The oxygen content of the atmosphere was a trifle higher than that to

which they were accustomed, and this, together with the low gravity—the planet itself was only half the mass of the earth—combined to give them a feeling of exhilaration. But as Mal stood gazing beside the hundred foot space ship which had brought him to Hesperides, a sudden feeling of numbness seized him. Fortunately, the sensation was only momentary, and when it had passed, he plunged into the ship and shut the door.

His wife's gaze fell on his face inquiringly. "An electro-sonic ray swept over me," he explained. "I think we had better stay inside here, where we're safe."

A needle of light leaped into existence at the top of the instrument panel, and then a second needle at the bottom. Helen powdered her nose calmly with a spray puff that she wore as a ring on her little finger, and observed, "We seem to be getting it from both sides. There's no doubt that a war is going on."

"Trust us to settle down cosily in No Man's Land," said Mal. The ship trembled slightly as a beam of energy smashed against it. He muttered, "I wonder which side is ours. It would be sad to find ourselves put out of commission by our own allies."

The instrument panel was glowing steadily now as energized rays of all sorts swept over the ship and kept increasing in intensity. Helen remarked, "I thought you said we'd be safe in here."

"Well, the weapons these people have are rather primitive, and our ship is armor-plated, but it hardly pays to take chances. I think we'd better dig in."

He touched a stud, and the ship began to wallow from side to side, like an ancient sailing vessel in a heavy sea. The earth sank away be-

neath them, and soon the rays of energy ceased to affect the indicators. Helen said gloomily, "Now we can return to our role of innocent bystanders, and watch these people kill each other off. Why are wars necessary, anyway?"

"Our job," Mal replied, "is not to worry about that, but to report what happens. We weren't sent as special correspondents all the way from Earth simply to get excited about why people fight." He was studying a screen on which was spread a panorama of the grassy plain above them. "There seems to be an attack developing."

FAR OFF to one side of the screen, tiny figures had become visible. They advanced slowly, taking advantage of every minor hill and valley to seek shelter from the sweeping energy rays. Mal muttered, "It can't be—no, of course not. I thought for a moment that they were men. But these people are not quite so primitive as all that. Those are robots advancing."

The robots were carrying heat-guns, and the atmosphere above the plain began to shimmer as the guns came into play, carving out paths of air of lower refractive index. Helen said, "What do you suppose is their objective?"

"Probably the enemy's heavy ray-artillery. But, Good Lord, they'll never get anywhere that way."

The robots had begun to fall. They would suddenly move with erratic steps, come to a full stop, and then collapse altogether, a tangle of molten and twisted metal. But those that remained unhit continued to advance.

The air on the other side of the plain became gradually hazy, tinged with a faint pink, and began to move

slowly to meet the advancing robots. The paths of the heat-rays, when they hit this cloud, became confused, and were quickly lost from sight. But the robots, those that survived the raying they had received, trudged forward unflatteringly. It was not until the edge of the cloud reached them that they showed signs of hesitation. But by this time it was too late. The pinkish gas enveloped them, and they began to creak, and then to drop. Only a scant dozen out of several thousand managed to reverse their direction in sufficient time to escape, and reach their own lines.

Mal stared at Helen. "They won't believe us back on Earth when we report this. A corrosive cloud, electrically directed. How many years ago was that supposed to have gone out of use?"

"About a hundred thousand."

"A hundred thousand. And these people still seem to regard it as the last word in modern weapons."

"They've been out of contact with Earth all that time," Helen pointed out. "It's only in the last few months that we've managed to get in touch with them once more. They've had no opportunity to learn of what has gone on since they left."

She and Mal thought back to the time when Hesperides had first come into human ken. There had been the sudden flaring up of a Nova on the rim of the Solar System itself, at a distance equal to several times the major axis of Pluto's orbit. After the first period of extraordinary brightness, the Nova had partially subsided, and become apparently stabilized as a star of the minus first magnitude.

Further observation had shown that it was responsive to the Sun's gravitational pull, and eventually its

orbit had been definitely determined as an extremely eccentric ellipse. At the moment of discovery, it was a trifle more than the minimum distance from the Sun, the focus of the ellipse.

An exploratory scientific expedition had discovered that about this Sol Novus, itself a planet in relation to the Sun, revolved a lifeless Satellite, Hesperides, that seemed to offer remarkable opportunities for human colonization. There was a suitable atmosphere, low gravity, and an average temperature that compared very favorably with that of Earth's temperate zones, for Sol Novus, not as bright as the major Sun, was only fifty million miles away from Hesperides. In addition, the planet's axis of rotation was so inclined to the plane of its own ellipse about Sol Novus that extremes of climate were no greater than on Earth.

COLONIES had immediately been sent out. But Earth had not been alone in its discovery that Hesperides offered a suitable abode for life. Mars too had reached the same conclusion, and Martian colonies were established within a few months after those of Earth. As at that time there was peace between the two planets, the new inhabitants of Hesperides had lived on terms of good will with each other.

These early settlers had been furnished not only with complete sets of mechanical equipment, but with an assortment of flora and fauna that were considered specially desirable for the new planet. Even the varieties of microscopic life—the bacteria, the yeasts, the molds, the protozoa—all had been chosen carefully. And from the reports that reached the home planets of Earth and Mars, the

resultant existence on Hesperides had been like living in a paradise.

After only a thousand years, however, Sol Novus, together with Hesperides, swung so far out away from the Sun, that connections with Earth and Mars became difficult, and were finally lost. For another thousand centuries its civilization developed out of contact with the parent planets. And now, when it was once more close enough for communication with the inner members of the Solar System, it was to find a universe at war.

For ten years now, Earth and Mars had been pecking away at each other at long range. The direct physical damage had been slight, but communications with other planets had been cut, and both Earth and Mars had been left in an unpleasant state of isolation. The one place where the two opposing powers could attack each other from convenient bases had been on Hesperides. When that planet had come close enough to be informed of what was going on, both the Martian and the Earth colonies had been commanded to enter the conflict.

It was to report on how the Terrestrial colony was obeying orders that Mal and his wife had been sent here. So far, everything they had seen had indicated that the weapons on both sides were so primitive that Earth had little either to hope or to fear from whatever happened on Hesperides.

Mal swept the battlefield with a scanning ray until he located a fallen robot. He brought the robot into focus on a small screen, and then there became slowly visible something they had not previously been able to see. On the metallic breast and forehead were stamped green circles, filled in with green and bluish

areas. Mal cried excitedly, "The Earth's insignia! They're our own! Helen, we were the ones who lost that attack!"

"We may be down, but we're never out," she returned. "Here we come again."

One glance at the larger screen was enough to show that the Earth's robots were returning to the attack. There seemed to be just as many of them this time as before, so that it was evident that there was no lack of replacements, but the advance seemed a trifle slower and more cautious. It was several seconds before Mal noticed that about each robot there was an extremely faint aura of yellow light.

Evidently, the Martians, having had such great luck with their corrosive cloud on the first occasion, counted on using the same weapon again with equal success. The pink haze swept down on the robots and enveloped them so that they were almost lost from sight. But the robots did not fall. The aura of yellow light dissipated the corrosive substance, and the robots continued their advance. The cloud drove onward, and was slowly lost in the distance.

Now the rays of the heat-guns swept the battlefield once more, to be met by answering rays from the Martians. An occasional robot fell, without affecting the rest of his comrades in the least. After a time, the answering rays from the Martian side became fewer in number, and more feeble in intensity. Either the Martians were retreating, or some of their guns had been put out of commission.

WHEN the robots stopped advancing, and settled down on what appeared to be a fixed position, Mal said, "There isn't going to be a

great deal more action here. Perhaps we'd better get moving."

"Perhaps," agreed Helen, and unexpectedly, they did move. The ship jerked suddenly to one side, and then began to slither slowly backward. Before Mal could collect his wits, a series of unpleasant shocks ran through the ship.

Helen laughed until the tears ran down her face. "We're being attacked by a Martian burrowing tank. How incredibly old-fashioned! To think that these people still go in for underground warfare!"

"Laugh if you please, but those explosions aren't very pleasant," grumbled Mal. "Shall we put the fellow out of his misery?"

"No, let's not take sides in the fighting. We're supposed to be observers only. Let's get up in the air, where we can get an idea of everything that's going on."

As the ship lifted out of the ground, Mal could see the robots lift their heads and stare after it. The first movement of their heat-guns came to a quick stop as they caught sight of the green and blue Earth insignia on its sides. Then the ship was up out of their range, and they returned to their task of digging in and setting up detector instruments that would inform them of the first signs of any counter-attack.

On the ground, the Martians appeared to be satisfied to maintain their present positions. But in the air, they were launching an attack in full force. Helen was the first to catch sight of their distant rocket-ships, blasting ahead slowly at what seemed to be no more than five hundred miles an hour.

"Bombers," she said. "With only a few fighting planes. And Mal—that face—"

Mal had centered his telescope

screen on a single plane. In the driver's seat was a powerful squat figure. The figure's face was red and horribly ugly, with two enormous eyes, a huge slit of a mouth, and a square, unpleasantly determined jaw.

Helen whispered, "I don't think Martians are good-looking even at their best. But evolution on Hesperides has certainly done nothing to make them more beautiful." She shuddered. "He can't harm us, but all the same, he frightens me."

It required several seconds for them to realize that the plane was heading straight for them. The driver had caught sight of their Earth insignia, and they could see the contortions of his face as his guns began spitting rays and chemicals at the ship. He seemed to be puzzled at seeing them sail along unhurt, for he swooped under them, and then came back to renew his attack. Helen asked, "Do you think that perhaps we could give him a dose of his own medicine—"

Mal shook his head. "He doesn't seem able to hurt us. Let's wait. I'm curious to see what he'll do."

The driver's enormous eyes glowed as his guns emptied without doing them the slightest damage. Suddenly, he changed his tactics. Instead of circling to avoid a collision, he dived straight at them. He hit them full speed, almost turning them over before they could right themselves, and then the remains of his plane plummeted to the ground.

"He had courage, that boy," said Mal admiringly. "He figured that ours was a more deadly fighting machine than his own, and he was willing to destroy himself if he could get us in the process."

"A barbarous sort of courage," replied Helen.

They were being attacked again. A formation of five planes was making straight for them, and the shock of five explosive waves beating simultaneously on their ship sent them both staggering. Mal said glumly, "Those fellows are beginning to be annoying. 'I'm tempted to take your advice about giving them a dose of their own medicine.'"

A SQUADRON of defense planes was approaching rapidly. The Martian attackers gave up the space ship as a bad job, and turned to defend their own bombers. In a moment, the sky was full of dogfighting groups, spitting and barking viciously at each other. The defensive armor, both Mal and Helen noticed, seemed to be greatly inferior to the weapons of offense. The fights lasted no more than a few seconds each before one or more planes broke away and dived for the ground. And wherever possible, a defeated pilot crashed into his victorious opponent, attempting to take his enemy down with him.

"Our men are just as brave as theirs," pointed out Mal. "And just as barbarous. I'm afraid you've no grounds for feeling superior, Helen."

The Martian bombers, their loads of chemicals and explosives emptied on Earth's territory, had turned and were making for home, their fighting planes attempting to shield them in a desperate rear-guard struggle. Helen sighed, "Well, that's about over. Don't you think, Mal, that it's about time we made for Earth headquarters, and got in contact with our own leaders?"

Mal nodded, and turned the ship in the opposite direction from that in which the bombers and their escorts were travelling. Several Earth planes approached them and hovered

about suspiciously for a few seconds before noticing their blue-green insignia and leaving them alone. Then the noise of the fighting died away behind them, and they sailed on peacefully, the humming of their own motors the only thing to reach their ears.

It was growing dark now as Sol Novus set beneath the eastern horizon. Twenty miles ahead of them, and almost four miles below, they could see the lights of an Earth city beginning to appear in the dusk. In the sky, the major sun was just becoming visible as the faintest of stars, and the familiar constellations that they had last seen from Earth's southern hemisphere began to spring dimly into view, their shape unaltered.

They watched the city becoming larger before them. The buildings were neither exceptionally large nor particularly beautiful, and once again Mal and Helen were conscious of a feeling of disappointment at the low level which civilization on Hesperides seemed to have attained. Isolation from Earth and Mars had apparently not done the colonists any good.

Mal looked questioningly at his wife. "Shall we descend here, or go further on into our own territory?"

"I'm in favor of going on and looking for something better. This hardly resembles a capital city, and we might get tied up in a lot of red tape with some minor officials."

Mal nodded. "The building in the center seems—"

And then there was no building in the center of the town.

The walls and the roof separated from each other with an apparent gentleness that was startling, and disappeared in a blaze of light. All over the city the squat ugly buildings

were disappearing in the same manner. Helen stared at her startled husband, and heard him mutter, "The explosion wave won't do us any good. We'd better get away." He pulled a lever, and the ship rocketed up with a speed that left the destroyed city in a few seconds more than thirty miles beneath them. Then he came to a stop, and almost three minutes later, the first noise of the explosions reached them, faint and dimly menacing, like the growl of a beast whose victims had escaped him.

Before the noise of the last explosion had died away, the city was in darkness once more, a darkness that this time was complete, with no winking points of light to break its sway. They swung down slowly to investigate what had happened. Mal said, "If there had been an air fleet dropping bombs from high altitudes, our instruments would have registered. And besides, the accuracy of aim would appear to rule that out. I suppose the Martians used their tunneling tanks to mine the city."

WITHOUT saying anything in return, Helen trembled. A beam of light from their ship swept over the devastated city and revealed complete death. There was not the slightest indication of a living human being, of the smallest animal, of a moving robot. Everything that was combustible seemed to have gone in the first explosion, so that nowhere was there a sign of even an inanimate flame. It was as if the city had been in ruins for ages.

Helen said in a low voice, "Even on Earth at its worst, there's never been anything like this. These people don't appear to be able to build very well, but they can certainly kill and destroy. Perhaps it's fortunate

that they have no better weapons than we've seen them use."

Mal commented, "They kill at our orders. Don't forget that this is our war, not theirs. Shall we look for another city?"

Helen nodded, and their ship rose again and drove on. Now there came to them the sight of a cluster of lights much greater in extent than the one that had been destroyed. They were pleased to see that the architecture of this town was of a superior order. The buildings were larger, more graceful, of more beautiful material. And the city itself was more alive. Their instruments detected a steady hum that rose from it, the hum of innumerable human voices blended into one low sound.

A search beam picked them out of the sky as they approached, the light dancing meaningfully for a few seconds on their Earth insignia. Then it was shut off, and a glowing tube on the instrument panel indicated a radio beam. Mal tuned in, and a man's voice spoke to them in Earth's language, in words that had remained unchanged for a thousand centuries, but with the faintest indication of a foreign accent.

"Calling Earth ship."

"Earth ship replying. We are special representatives sent to secure information on progress of war. You have been informed of our coming. We want to meet Earth Colony's president."

A girl's voice said, "One moment, please. We are making connections to the president."

It was only a few seconds later that the president spoke to them. "Will you please radio your images, and the images of your credentials."

Mal turned on the television sender, and there was a moment's pause

while the president scanned their credentials. Then he said, "You will find a landing field to the north of the city. An official delegation will meet you there. Welcome to Hesperides, Mr. and Mrs. Ventner."

Mal turned off the television sender, and grinned at the old-fashioned courtesy. The landing field turned out to be five times as large as was needed, and he noticed the admiring glances from the official delegation as they watched what seemed to them a skillful landing. Evidently, they were unaccustomed to the automatic landing devices that every Earth ship now possessed.

THE PRESIDENT was a tall man, with a very grave expression, and a very ugly face that Helen found charming. Except for his clothes, which had undergone countless years of development different from those of Earth, and consequently appeared to be several months out of date, he could have passed for an inhabitant of Earth itself. Whatever changes evolution on Hesperides had caused in the Martians, it had not done any harm to the descendants of Earthmen.

Mal asked anxiously, "Will our ship be safe here? Just an hour or so ago, we saw a Martian attack—"

The president smiled. "The ship will be perfectly safe. We are hardly in the same position here as we were in New Carthage."

The official delegation was presented to them. The gallant manners of the men pleased Helen more than she was willing to admit, but later she did whisper to Mal, "If these people here are barbarians, at least they're charming ones."

He smiled back at her vaguely. He was listening to the president's daughter describing the latest play,

and Helen could see that he was at least as much interested in looking at the girl as in understanding what she was saying. Even when these Earth colonists were ugly, thought Helen, as was the president, they remained paradoxically handsome. And when their features were regular, as were those of his daughter—If she hadn't known Mal so well she would have been jealous.

Before discussing the business that had brought them there on such a long journey, they were to be shown the city. Mal and Helen watched intently as the president guided them through the public squares, pointed out the film libraries, described the places of amusement. Everything they saw seemed to be in perfect taste, conceived with as excellent judgment as anything on Earth itself, and carried out without a flaw. The ugliness of that destroyed city of New Carthage began to be a mystery.

When they had finally beheld all the more important features of the city, it was too late to discuss the war. They were shown to an apartment of their own, with robot servants to care for their every need. Helen said thoughtfully, "They're barbarians, of course. They're much behind us in science, and they're absolutely ferocious in battle. But not all their attention has gone to learning how to destroy. They're charming!"

"That's the sort of thing that would impress a woman."

"And the girls are beautiful. But I don't suppose that sort of thing would impress a man."

"I think," said Mal absently, "that it's about time to go to sleep."

In the morning, they breakfasted with the president, without once touching on the subject that had

brought them to Hesperides. It was not until the breakfast dishes had been removed and dissolved in a current of superheated steam that their discussion became serious. The president said, "I must confess that although we are more than holding our own, we can not exactly claim to be winning the war."

Mal asked, "How do your forces compare with those of the enemy?"

"We have a population of some two hundred and twenty millions against his two hundred forty-five. On the other hand, our industry is somewhat better organized, and our robots are of slightly superior design. The net result is that we are about even."

HELEN SAID, "I am interested, Mr. President, in knowing what the relative losses have been."

"Ah, the losses. They have been exceptionally high on both sides, slightly higher on the side of the enemy, though, I am happy to say. We have had only five cities destroyed as against his seven. We have practically ruined his aircraft and robot industries. It is true that we have only about ten per cent of our own industries left," he added with a smile. "As for losses in instruments of war, I don't have the figures at hand, but I can secure them for you very easily. I do remember that we have lost more than fifteen million robots of one kind or another as against the enemy's sixteen. Over eighty per cent of ours were of the cheap Type C. But almost forty per cent of his were of more expensive types."

"I'm not referring to losses in material, Mr. President," explained Helen patiently. "I'm curious to know what your losses are in terms of human beings."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"How many men, women, and children have been killed?"

The president lifted his eyebrows. "Why, none, of course."

Mal interrupted. "We're not joking, Mr. President. We'd like to know what your casualties are."

The president stared at them. "Good Lord, do you mean to tell me that in your wars, people actually get killed?"

"I thought," replied Helen weakly, "that was one of the purposes of a war."

"Not at all. A war is fought to determine which of two groups is the stronger. Modern science being what it is, strength is determined mainly by the reserves of men and materials. We test our men by their ability to produce materials, and we test the materials by their behavior in actual fighting. As we have robots to operate our weapons for us, there is no need whatever to kill human beings. We fight until one side is clearly on the point of exhausting its materials, and victory appears certain for the other. We then arrange peace."

"And there are never any casualties?"

"It's bad enough to waste so many million dollars' worth of robots and valuable machines. It would be inexcusable to waste human lives."

Mal said, "We saw a city destroyed."

"New Carthage. A city without life. All the cities in the battle zone are operated purely by robots for the manufacture of war materials. Their destruction never harms any one."

Helen objected, "But you have human aviators."

The president smiled. "You must have seen the Martian robot flyers. They were designed by a man with a sense of humor, and at a distance

seem fairly human. But they are completely inanimate affairs."

THERE was an embarrassed silence. Neither Mal nor Helen could meet the president's eye. Mal said finally, "I need hardly tell you, Mr. President, how pleased we are that you have suffered no casualties. But I feel that our generals back home will hardly be satisfied. They will be under the impression that you are not putting forth your best efforts."

The president returned heatedly, "This war has already dislocated our entire economic life. If you feel—"

Mal shook his head. "You misunderstand me, Mr. President. What I have given you is not my personal opinion, but the opinion my superiors will undoubtedly express. I am afraid you will have a difficult time convincing them they are wrong."

The president demanded, "Am I to have my people slaughtered merely to satisfy them that I am in earnest?"

Helen started. "What an excellent idea!"

They turned to look at her. She went on rapidly, "Why not lay out special cemeteries? You can have several million tombstones inscribed with the names of both Earth men

and Martians. Of course there need be no bodies under the tombstones, but our superiors will never know that. The tombstones alone will be enough to satisfy them."

Both men burst out laughing. Helen flushed. "If you don't think the idea is a good one, I'd like to hear of something better!"

The president said soothingly, "It's an excellent idea. Only—" Then he looked at Mal again, and they burst once more into laughter. This time Helen joined them.

They left Hesperides a week later. The Martians had been informed of the necessity of constructing cemeteries, and a short truce had been declared for the purpose. As Mal and Helen took off from the airport at which they had landed, they looked back longingly. The beautiful city was shrinking away below them, and far off, the green fields that covered so large a portion of the planet were becoming visible again. The scene was so breath-taking in its beauty, that for a long moment they remained silent, looking down. Helen murmured, "What charming people!"

"Yes, but a war in which no one is killed—" Mal smiled. "What barbarians!"

**FOR A CLOSE UP, LOOK
AT LIFE, SEE**

CLOSE-UP
MAGAZINE

10c On All Stands

SCIENCE FICTION CLASSICS

an article by
WILFRED OWEN MORLEY

SCIENCE fiction enthusiasts are always bringing up the subject of classic imaginative literature, speaking either of stories already accepted by the literary world as classical, such as Edgar Allan Poe's "Unparalleled Adventure of Hans Pfaal," H. G. Wells' "War of the Worlds," etc., or of tales long accepted by fans themselves as classical. A third group would be items published within the last five years which, to the minds of readers, will be regarded as classics in decades to come.

There is no doubt but that the fan feels very strongly about these matters. Any story which moved him deeply, opened up new vistas to him, is one which he feels should be classical, so to be regarded by readers of the future.

But science fiction, in this one regard, does not differ from any other type of literature. Here, as in other types, one finds many items which, it was thought, would be remembered for decades, yet which have been lost in forgetfulness within the brief span of five years.

What, then, is the test for a classic of science fiction?

It is not the accuracy of the scientific stories underlying the item, for many stories which are now regarded as classical literature are quite unsound in that regard; it is not the matter of prophecy, a case of the story being classical until the marvels it predicted become fact, for many of Jules Verne's best tales, based upon marvels which are now commonplace, are still regarded by the

literati as fine reading. It is not characterization, alone, for many finely-characterized stories have been almost entirely forgotten.

To find the answer, we must look to the field of literature outside the realm of science fiction. And once we do this, the answer is not difficult. Simply ask yourselves: what type of writing has survived through the ages? Exclude from this category all those items of "classic" fame which were stuffed down your throat during school days, which you privately and frankly thought to be epitomes of utter boredom. But, somewhere in your reading, you must have found stories written in past centuries which meant a great deal to you, which, perhaps surprised you because you didn't expect to find them thus. You read them, perhaps, because you felt that you ought to read *some* classic work and either you picked these out at random, or friends tipped you off that these bits were not too hard to digest.

Think carefully. For probably the outstanding feature was your thinking at one time or another, as you read the item in question: "This person had a remarkably modern outlook." And that is your answer.

And if, in the 21st, 22d, and 23d century, any of the science fiction stories you read today will be read with interest and enthusiasm then, it will be because the readers of that distant future think, as they peruse the stories in question: "This person had a remarkably modern viewpoint. Why, I can't believe that he really lived in those horrible days of the 20th Century."



THE SHADOWLESS WORLD

by OLIVER SAARI

(Author of "Under the Sand-Sea," "The Life Jewel," etc.)

They could see that world plainly, yet all the instruments indicated it wasn't there. They went out into space on a madcap adventure, landed on the strange green star, as it was called. And there they found the mystery was just beginning to unravel. An unusual story.

I WAS exposing a batch of negatives, which I swore would be the last if there were no better results, when Steve Manning blew in.

I said, "Hello," and thought, "Here is where I forget that damned green

nuisance for awhile." But Steve was otherwise inclined.

"What have you learned about the Green Nova?" he shot at me.

"You're ninety-seven requests late," I snarled, waving a packet of

telegrams in his face, "and the answer is still *nothing!*"

"But—"

I dragged him to the eyepiece of our smaller telescope, a 20-inch refractor. He peered intently through it for a moment, then stared upward into the summer night through the dome slide.

"Did you take the objective off the tube?" he asked. "The telescope doesn't make any difference."

"Don't ask me why," I whined. "Ask the perverse fate that sent that green thing our way. The rays from the star aren't refracted by glass. They breeze right through a photoplate. And just try to get a spectrum off the things—*there isn't any!*"

"Amazing. Nice object for study. But how about triangulation? How about gravitational influence?"

"Triangulation!" I screamed. "The thing is crazy, I tell you. We can't observe it with instruments. And there isn't any gravitational influence. The astronomers are the only thing it disturbs."

"As bad as that?" mused Steve. "Strange, but I expected something like that."

THAT SOUNDED funny, coming from Steve Manning. An old pupil of mine, a brilliant young fellow. Aside from that, unfortunately, the heir to a couple of million dollars and lazy as the devil. Content to waste his time in night clubs instead of using a little of his coin and brain for the good of science.

"Why this sudden interest in astronomy?" I asked him. "You haven't looked at a science book since you gypped the U out of a diploma."

"That's what's worrying me. I don't know. It started a couple of months ago, just before the Green

Nova was discovered. I tell you, I knew it was coming before the astronomers did!"

"Chronic hangover," I diagnosed brutally.

"No. I've been hanging around the library, reading. The other day I found myself plodding through Hargreave's 900 - page astrophysical treatise and it seemed elementary. Absurd in spots. How——"

"Not surprising," I said, a warm glow flooding my being. "Hargreave is a quack, a charlatan. He has a reputation but he knows nothing."

How could I, an astronomer, thus denounce a world-famous physicist? Well, we'd been fellow professors in the same university and—but that's another story. Steve waved aside my opinions on the matter and went on.

"I've put a lot of money into a laboratory. I'm building a machine of some sort, pretty complicated machine. But sometimes I don't know what it is!"

"You think it has something to do with the Green Star?"

"I think the Green Star has some bearing on the things I've been doing. If you find out anything about it, let me know."

After Steve had gone, I stared moodily at the object of our troubles. It was a magnificent thing. If I hadn't been an astronomer, maddened by its mystery, I'd have thought it beautiful. In star sector 2, sandwiched between Andromeda and Cassiopeia, it overshadowed all the other stars. For six weeks it had blazed across the heavens, thumbing its nose at our instruments. That movement, proving that it was within planetary distance, was the only thing we could find out about it.

AT THE first opportunity I drove out to Steve's place.

His country estate had changed. The ancestors would have turned over in their graves if they'd seen the big workshop in the middle of the lawn and the heavy trucks that trundled ruthlessly over the green.

A worried-looking butler took me to Steve, who was hunched over a desk. He nodded briefly to me but didn't say anything. I looked over his shoulder and was astounded. The stuff he was writing didn't make sense. It was mathematics of a sort, but we hadn't taught him anything like that in school. Some of the symbols were new to me.

When Steve finally spoke his voice sounded tired.

"Well, Prof. How's the Green Star behaving?"

"It isn't. But what's come over you? What's all this stuff on your lawn? You started a shop?"

"One at a time, please," he smiled. "No, I'm not going into business. I'm building a—a ship, of sorts. A vehicle to navigate space. I'm going to the Green Star."

"You—space ship—you're mad!"

"No. The ship's almost finished. Tonight or tomorrow I'm leaving."

"When did you start working on this—uh—ship of yours? Don't tell me you've been carrying on secret experiments while pretending to be a playboy!"

"Not till a couple of months ago. Since then I've had ideas. I've spent a lot of money."

"But why go to the Green Star?" I asked. "Why not to Mars or Venus or—something sensible?"

"I'm building the ship for the sole purpose of going to the Green Star. Why should I go to the planets?"

What a question! So senseless, naive, but reasonable. What did it imply? My job at the observatory

would have to wait until I found out. I stayed.

During the afternoon Steve managed to leave his screwy mathematics long enough to show me his ship. In thirty feet of sleek, streamlined projectile were compartments, beds, room and supplies for several people. A couple of intelligent looking technicians were adding finishing touches to the polished hull.

I got a look at some of the machinery and couldn't make coil or condenser out of it, except that it was gloriously compact in design. If this thing would do what Steve claimed, it wasn't an invention. It was a miracle.

"You designed and built this thing inside of two months?" I cried. "Impossible."

"But true. I hired the best workmen money could buy. They've done a good job, even if they did think I was crazy."

I told him then and there that I wasn't going to leave until I'd seen that ship work. Steve didn't mind my staying, but after supper he sank back to his weird calculations and I couldn't pry him loose.

Developments came. Steve suddenly threw away his pencil and listened intently. I couldn't hear anything, but Steve said, "Oh, oh," and bounded through the door like a shot. I ran after him.

Outside he made directly for the space ship hangar. I could see him jerking something from his pocket, a metal object that glinted in the bright moonlight. A gun!

In the shadows along the hangar wall a stooped, white-haired figure was skulking.

Without slacking his pace Steve threw three shots at the intruder, who dodged into the doorway. A light flashed from the shadows; a hissing

pencil of white stabbed at us. By the glare at its source I could see the white-haired man holding some sort of gadget in his hand, like a flashlight.

But it wasn't a flashlight. The beam that missed Steve by inches was hot, incredibly hot. Where it struck the building behind us, the vines burst into flame.

Steve dodged into the dark shadow of a truck. I stooped down beside him as the burning ray swung in my direction. The upholstery in the cab was instantly afire.

STEVE HAD thrown away his gun and was sitting stolid-faced on the running board. Suddenly the ray disappeared, but the truck went on burning. Rivulets of flame were creeping up the side of Steve's house and I could see the butler running about. But Steve paid no attention.

He got up and walked around the front of the truck without saying a word. I picked up enough courage to peer over the hood.

No words were being spoken, but Steve and the white-haired man stood facing each other at the hangar door. The stranger pocketed his heat gun and led Steve into the dark interior.

"Hey!" I yelled.

No answer. I sacrificed a bit of my dignity, but that didn't help either. All I had left to do was to follow them.

The door of the space ship was open. I ducked in, and found them both in the control room. I opened my jaw, and it froze open when I recognized the white-haired stranger.

"Hargreave!" I croaked.

Hargreave! The man who had called my paper on absorption spectra a hoax, and whom I had called a cad. . . . But that, again, was another story. Certainly Hargreave was the

last man I'd have expected or wanted to see.

I thought I saw a light of recognition in his eyes for a moment but it was gone in an instant.

"Go," he said in a toneless voice, then turned with Steve to contemplation of the control board.

"Poppy!" cried a feminine voice behind me. "How could you be so rude?"

I wheeled, and scarcely recognized Hargreave's daughter. Three years had done a wonderful job of improvement. All that was left that I knew was the "poppy."

"Terry!" said Hargreave severely. "I told you not to follow me."

"I had to. You've been acting so—so—"

The floor picked that moment to lurch sickeningly under our feet. Terry Hargreave screamed and spun into one of the upholstered chairs. There was a far-away crash. A weight pushed me back into a seat so hard my withered old lungs had to gasp for breath.

"You've started the ship!" I yelled at Steve, who was at the controls.

"I have."

"Let us out of this thing!" cried the girl. "I'll call the police, I'll—"

"I'm afraid you can't call the police, Terry," Hargreave said. "You see, we're on a ship and it's moving. You shouldn't have come."

She subsided, but the glance she gave Steve would have withered an onion. And already the viewports disclosed stars brighter than anywhere on earth. We were in airless space!

It was kidnapping, of course, pure and simple; but after the first excitement it wasn't so bad. Steve set the nose of the ship for the Green Star and from there he would not budge it. Hargreave, too, was dead

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Future Fiction

set on going. Terry was glad enough to be with her worthless father, and I—well, what astronomer wouldn't jump at a free ride like that? The ship could accommodate us all.

It didn't take as many days as I'd thought. I don't know what Steve had put in those motors, but they certainly did their stuff.

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We were hurtling toward it at terrific speed, but decelerating. Down, down toward a landscape, and then a landing without a jar. I was dazed. It wasn't natural. A ship of such perfection that it had brought us easily across millions of space—to what?

The ship rested atop a grassy knoll at the edge of a forest of giant tree ferns. The ferns swayed and the grass rippled gently in an unseen wind. To one side reared the slim towers of a fantastic city, a compact cluster of spike-like buildings with spidery connecting arches and aerial roadways.

I couldn't see all of these through the ports, but *I knew they were there*. I can't describe even now that feeling of perception that didn't have anything to do with the sense of sight.

"Why, it's a city!" Terry Hargrave was saying in hushed amazement. "A fairy city with people—strange people."

I strode over to a quartz port and found it was all there. It was real; that strange sixth sense hadn't fooled us. But there was no color in the landscape, or only one color. Sky,

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Future Fiction

(Continued From Page 101)

asked to change the subject. "I'd like to go out but don't know how the air is."

"There isn't any air."

"No air! You're crazy. How—"

I gave it up and followed his pointing finger to the suits. There were six of them, completely rubberized and flexible, with oxygen tanks and glass-visored helmets.

"I WANT to see that city too!" cried Terry Hargreave, blushing a little as she held one of the suits against her slim body. It was oversize, built on the order of Steve's rugged frame.

"Do you think it's wise to go out?" Hargreave asked of Steve. "Shouldn't we try to fly this thing back to Earth as soon as possible?"

"I can't remember how."

"Neither can I," said Hargreave in a low voice.

Meanwhile Terry had climbed into one of the suits. It didn't enhance the figure but it looked as if it might withstand the rigors of space. Steve was helping her with the fastenings—Steve, the cold saturnine genius who had suddenly become human. I didn't like the way he kept looking at her. She was as nice a girl as you'd find, but she was a Hargreave. And Steve was like a son to me.

I vented my ire in a ferocious scowl at Hargreave, which he returned. We hadn't spoken a word to each other the whole trip.

Eventually we were all attired in the suits. Just to show Steve I thought he was crazy I placed myself in front of the door when he opened it.

The door was power-operated and went up on a sliding arrangement. There was a *whoosh*, and I picked myself up foolishly outside, looking

The Shadowless World

around. Steve had been right: there wasn't any air, or very little of it. And still the knee-deep grass rippled in a breeze!

The first thing I saw was Hargreave, grinning triumphantly, coming to help me up. I ignored him and looked toward the forest, where I could still sense the things lurking. I thought I heard a screech as the huge batlike thing in the nearest tree flapped its wings, but it must have been imagination. There wasn't any air to carry sound.

The others were all looking at the city. I pushed my helmet against Steve. That way we could talk, even in a vacuum.

"You notice the grass and everything seem to glow," I said.

"I'm beginning to remember why," Steve said. "But let's go. I think we're wanted in the city."

Hargreave and his daughter were already striding toward the tall towers. I followed Steve. I seemed somehow weightless. Walking was very much like floating in a dream toward a dream city.

THE PEOPLE in the city were short and stocky and scaly-skinned. They had big heads with delicate features and the most somber expressions I have ever seen. There weren't many of them walking around and they were hard to see because they were exactly the same shade of green as everything else.

One of the beings approached and stood before us. Steve and Hargreave appeared to be listening, and when I tried I could hear it too.

"You are wanted in the council chamber," it seemed to be saying in flawless English. "Follow me."

We followed, through cavern-like streets bristling with strange archi-

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Future Fiction

(Continued From Page 103)

ture. The "council chamber" turned out to be in a building about a mile high, and I'd have sworn it was all one room. That room was vaster than space, rising all around us in green-tiered majesty that was as symmetrical and beautiful as the city itself.

There were people in those tiers. I won't try to tell you how many people there were. I couldn't count them. Row on row, tier on tier of green-scaled faces in rapt attention.

And we were the center of that attention. We were on the central stage of that vast auditorium. We four, the being that had brought us here, another like him, and ten sober, withered creatures that sat about a great round table.

It was no longer quiet. There was a murmur of thought, a pulse-beat from that great throng. It was solid, solid as the planet.

One of the oldsters at the round table rose as if to speak.

"We are assembled for the trial of Zeymo and Jovar," pealed its stentorian thought, "the two renegades who have returned from the planet known as Earth. Let Zeymo speak."

The one who had brought us to the chamber now faced the assemblage.

"People of Od," it said, "we two who have just returned from the unjust exile bring you a great plan. But first I must explain how we have returned.

"Long ago the council decreed us undesirable, and projected us across a segment of space to a solid world. Only a mind force comparable to itself, the council said, could bring us back across the mind-destroying nothingness.

"By our own ingenuity, Jovar and I have returned.

The Shadowless World

"There was on our world of exile a crude beginning of protoplasmic life. It was already beginning to think, to reason. By stimulating certain individuals, by suggesting inventions, we were able to advance the physical science of this world enough to permit building a space machine. A physical machine to accomplish what the council thought we could not do. For with this machine we could transport physical substance through space, living creatures with material brains to hold our minds intact. . ."

STEVE WAS shaking me. "I know what it's all about now, Prof," he was yelling. "These two birds have been on earth a long time. They've been working night and day on humanity to keep us stirred up, so they could come back—"

"You mean they're responsible for—"

"Everything! The mean-looking fellow they called Jovar was responsible for Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler—and Hargreave! All of them. He's been the driving force behind a lot of trouble—just to keep the world stirred up, you see."

"And the other one?"

"Zeymo? Oh, he's a little better. He was once Aritosthenes, the Greek who measured the exact size of the Earth eighteen hundred years too soon. He caused the Renaissance by dishing out a few new ideas when the world was ready for them. He had me build the space ship for him because I had a lot of coin and was in a position to do it quickly. Jovar got wise too late and tried it with Hargreave. It was no go, so Jovar decided to sponge on Zeymo. They had a little argument, you remember. But it was settled."

(Continued On Page 106)

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Future Fiction

(Continued From Page 105)

"How is it done? We didn't see any of these things on Earth or in the ship. How—"

"Don't you see? They don't really exist. They're just minds; they aren't physical. In outer space they'd just expand into infinity and vanish. They can't exist anywhere except on a good-sized planet and—here."

There was a sudden surge in the throb of thought beating down on us. Excitement was rising in the huge chamber. Excitement that was tangible, visible as the beings themselves.

"Listen, people of Od," the withered councilman implored. "You know why these two were exiled: to remove their fundamental disturbing influence from the Common Thought. To exist, we must think alike. These two do not wish to think alike! They were exiled to prevent the destruction of our world!"

This time I shook Steve.

"How could two radicals destroy their world?"

"It's hard to believe," Steve said, "but *this world has already been destroyed*. I can't imagine how long ago it must have happened. But something Cosmic blew the world of Od clear out of space sometime in the last billion or so years."

"What are you talking about? We're—"

"On a ghost world. A world that once existed, but no longer.

"Whatever destroyed the planet, the people knew about it before it came. They couldn't do anything about it, so they all gathered in this room and just waited.

"They thought. They thought if they could fix the image of this planet in their minds strongly enough, they could save it. Could save the

pattern, even when the actual physical substance vanished."

"But why? Why?"

"Self preservation. Their united wills weren't strong enough to actually create matter, but they came pretty close. They stay here, these disembodied spirits, because they're all thinking of the same thing. Even solid beings like us can walk here and see things. We can see them, see the whole damned planet because they *think* of it."

"Must be powerful minds. But what do they hope to gain?"

"They think if they hold the pattern, the *Image* long enough, some day matter will reform and they'll be real again. The council fed them that."

"I see why a couple of radicals like Zeymo and Jovar wouldn't be wanted," I said. "Why, in that set-up, bring up a few wild disturbing ideas and the whole scheme would go keflung."

AS IF to prove my words, the thought-pulse of the mighty assemblage rose in a crescendo. They were cheering the councilman. Even that was bad. If they cheered too much, and took their minds off the *Image* . . .

"My plan," Zeymo was saying to a hostile audience, "is this. I suggest we merge our world with the solid planet Earth. Yes, abandon the *Image!* I have lived on a solid world. It is far more—"

They didn't let him finish. The oldsters at the round table were up on their feet in an instant. The whole assemblage was on its feet. The thought-pulse rose to an unbearable pitch—and suddenly it was no longer rhythmic. The vast hall was one great discord.

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(Continued From Page 107)



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I stared in horror. The mile-high ceiling was hidden in a green haze. It wavered. It all seemed suddenly uncertain, the great hall, the people. They were no longer there. I was drowning in a sea of jumbled thought that no longer had any meaning. . .

It must have been my imagination. The hall was there, and the council. Zeymo had the floor.

"My plan is better," he insisted. "I have brought several of the solid creatures from Earth to let you know for yourself the comfort of inhabiting them. On Earth I learned a new concept—pleasure!"

The temper of the crowd was uncertain. It had not been treated to anything new or radical for millennia. It couldn't take it. I could feel uncertainty under my feet; what made it worse was that Zeymo was convincing some of them. Already the *Image* was wavering.

I tried to close my eyes to the tumult, tried to look at my companions. Steve had his arm around Terry Hargreave, and I hoped it was only for the sake of communication. Steve and a Hargreave. I didn't like it.

Hargreave himself looked incompetent, scared. That made me feel better.

Suddenly Steve grabbed my arm.

"Let's get back to the ship!" he yelled across the contact.

I knew why we had to. I started pushing Hargreave down an aisle, Steve and the girl were ahead of us. The beings in the seats paid no attention; their attention was rapt on Zeymo and the council.

All the while I could hear Zeymo still arguing, and the crowd still hostile, and the council trying desperately to bring the mob back to a united front. I could see now why it had to be united, why there could be no

The Shadowless World

dissension. The whole quasi-solid planet depended on the strength of thought, of unified will. If it was weakened by argument . . . where would we be?

I thought we'd be free to think outside the chamber, but those pulsing waves of thought kept beating us with mental hammer-blows.

"I hope the council lasts out till we reach the ship," panted Steve, running beside me.

"If they don't?"

"Don't think about it. Damn Jovar and Zeymo! Why did they have to wreck such a beautiful plan?"

THE CITY around us was crumbling. The magnificent buildings were dissolving, not into dust but into a green haze that added strength to the maddening pulse. The spidery archways, vanishing like webs before a flame. Masterpieces of alien architecture turning into green mist.

Once the council made a supreme effort to bring order. The city was back, but queer and grotesque, without its former symmetry.

"Forget the city," Steve said. "Think about the planet, the ground we're running on. And think hard!"

I tried, but all I could think of was its unreality. That must have made it worse.

Far on a knoll ahead was our ship. The grass was going. The forest was gone; it must have been among the first things to go. Those tree-ferns, those winged creatures. They hadn't really been there, of course—only on the world that had been destroyed.

The ground seemed to be rolling gently like a giant monster breathing its last. It was swirling, enveloping us. . . .

I ran with the speed of madness. Steve was far ahead, almost to the

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Future Fiction

(Continued From Page 109)

ship, and so was the girl. Hargreave was dropping back, his face livid under the helmet.

I concentrated on outrunning Hargreave. That way I got a few more inches of speed.

As from a distance I could hear the voice of Zeymo, still urging, "There is yet time, people of Od. The *Image* is doomed. Our only chance is to concentrate on my plan, to keep our minds intact until we reach Earth."

It was a bad line of argument. Even the council went to pieces. Without its coordinating influence the whole structure became just a mass of individuals. Disembodied spirits, suddenly boundless. . . .

I was yards from the ship when suddenly there was nothing. I was sinking through endless green mist that vanished and swirled like a vapor, leaving nothing.

Nothing.

Only space and the stars and a tiny blinding sun. All around, the black, unutterable gulf of infinity. No more trace of the world of Od.

I floated helplessly, weightlessly, my heart doing flip-flops. I could move my arms and legs but they took me nowhere.

Something was clinging to my boot. It was Hargreave, holding on like a drowning man. In his eyes was the fear of infinity, the same fear he must have seen in mine.

Hargreave! He was solid, real. Something I could feel, in this awful abyss of nothingness. I grabbed him and held on, closing my eyes, and thanked God for him.

For an eternity we floated there in each other's arms. I loved Hargreave. Once I had called him a cad; now he was all I had left of the universe.

Then Steve's ship moved toward us.

The Shadowless World

STEVE AND Terry had reached the ship on their momentum alone.

"You can fly the ship now," I pointed out to Steve as I was climbing out of the space-suit.

"Sure, Prof. I remember a lot of things now."

I looked at Hargreave. He looked at me. He wasn't such a bad guy to have around, and maybe I *had* been wrong. We looked into each other's eyes and clasped hands.

I noticed Steve had his arm around Terry Hargreave's waist. I didn't mind now. He winked at her.

"Don't forget, I'm going to have you arrested when we get back to Earth," she teased.

"I didn't have a thing to do with it," Steve laughed. "But don't hold it against Zeymo. He was a good old guy, for a ghost."

"Are you sure he's gone?"

"Sure. They're all gone—wherever they should have gone a million years ago. They couldn't exist without the *Image*."

"Except by taking over some solid living body," I pointed out.

"There aren't any within millions of miles."

"Except us," said Hargreave.

I looked at him, startled. He didn't look inhabited, but tired and happy. I was free, too; I knew none of them had taken me over. Too bad. With a mind like Zeymo to feed me a few ideas, I might have gone places.

The ship lurched suddenly under our feet. We were heading back toward Earth. Steve was at the controls, his hands playing smoothly over the buttons.

Too smoothly!

I knew the answer then. The world of Od had one survivor. Zeymo was going back with us.

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